GOD'S RADICAL GRACE

Challenging Sermons for Ordinary Time(s)

J. HAROLD ELLENS

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By

J. Harold Ellens

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This volume is dedicated to my seven children: Deborah Lynn Ellens, Jacqueline Ellens, Daniel Scott Ellens, Rebecca Jo Ellens, Harold Rocklan Ellens, Brenda Leigh Ellens, and Brett Alexander Ellens Hutchison. In my heart of hearts I believe it is true that I thought so hard about these things of God, worked so hard to master scripture and exegete the Bible honestly, and devoted myself to learn well the craft of rhetoric and oratory so as to express my transcendent faith vision in language and figures of speech that would be engaging and memorable, mainly to try to get across to my children the essence of life and truth as I see and believe it. I pray God that it works for them. If others have been and will be blessed by these lines, thanks be to God, the Pervasive Divine Spirit, incarnated in all aspects of the universe!

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FOREWORD

As I compose this Foreword for my respected colleague and mentor, The Reverend Doctor J. Harold Ellens, I am sitting among the trees at the top of Mt Tabor in the Galilee. A gentle (and very welcome) breeze is blowing across the crest of this ancient site that has long been associated with the numinous experience of Jesus that we have come to call the Transfiguration.

Whatever the historicity of that episode which first appears in Mark's groundbreaking narrative of Jesus, and however we assess the claims of Mt Tabor to have been the location of the event, this is a place that invites us to reflection. Here among the ruins of imperial Christianity the wind blows afresh, and we are urged to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

In this volume that you hold in your hands, Jay Harold Ellens has assembled the fruits of his own sustained listening to that same Spirit. For seventy years, and I suspect even a little longer, Ellens has been listening with intent, and with considerable credentials. With a natural wisdom honed in the parish, in the academy, and in the therapist's salon, he has listened long and hard to the still small voice (perhaps better translated as "the sound of sheer silence") that melts hearts of stone and splits the trees on the mountain top.

Long practiced in listening, and no slouch at communicating, Ellens now invites us to listen once more, or perhaps for the first time, to what he has discerned the Spirit saying to humanity in and through his own experience. The sermons gathered here represent, in my view, religion-scholarship at its best. Mortgaged to neither the church nor the academy, here is bold and faithful wisdom that seeks to transform the lives of God's people; all people.

One of the predictable tactics of people whose religious equilibrium is disturbed by critical scholarship is to question whether "this stuff preaches." Such a question is rarely genuine, and for the most part presupposes a negative response. Like the scribe confronted by Jesus' parable of the Samaritan, such people are seeking to evade the hard intellectual and spiritual work required to re-imagine their religious tradition. Yet Christianity desperately needs reform and renewal so that it may truly serve the best and deepest interests of humanity in the third millennium.

Ellens is not afraid of the hard work such revisioning requires, and for that I am grateful.

While his writing—and his preaching—may at times be confronting and disturbing, there is no doubting that such a compassionate and intellectually rigorous Christianity "preaches" well. Yes, friend, you can preach this stuff; and it will turn people around if they have ears to hear.

It is clear that Ellens is prepared to jettison many of the narrative and dogmatic structures within which Christianity has happily made itself a home. Some will find that radical prophetic streak challenging. Ellens will be happy to evoke such a response. Others will find his work offers encouragement to think creatively as we seek to fashion lives that are holy and true in the strange new land of our time and place. Ellens cheers us on.

However, as these gathered sermons attest, after discarding the historical and cultural accretions of traditional Christianity, Ellens engages with the deep truths of the biblical tradition that is both the source and the touchstone for Jews and Christians.

I have benefited from reading these collected sermons, and I am happy to recommend them to every reader and preacher for your own benefit as well.

—Gregory C. Jenks
Midsummer in the Holy Land, 2012

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Harold Ellens knows how to craft a memorable sermon and how to always have something new to say, a new angle of vision, a beautifully told anecdote from his own immensely varied life experience. Shows why reading sermons need never become an old-fashioned pastime.”
—David J. A. Clines, Professor of Biblical Studies, Sheffield University

“As facets on a gem reveal its hidden beauty, so Dr. Ellens' sermons for Ordinary Time disclose the depth and beauty of the scriptures relating to these months of the Christian year between Pentecost and Advent. His long career prepared him well to author this book. With the approach of a scholar, the patience of a teacher, and the understanding of a pastor, he gives the reader new insights into these familiar scriptures. To read one of his sermons on a glorious summer day is to pray in the words of a favorite hymn, "Be Still, my Soul, The Lord is on Thy Side." To read one of his sermons on a day of great need, will give the reader reason to be grateful for this book.”
—Beuna Coburn Carlson, Church Administrator and Christian Educator, PCUSA Retired.

“I have only actually *heard* one sermon by J. Harold Ellens, but reading this wonderful collection reminds me why he has long been one of my favorite homilists. More like a conversation than a monologue, these sermons immediately pull me into dialogue within myself and with God. Read them and be challenged, stimulated, provoked, informed, and edified. Receive them as medicine for your spirit and soul. Be prepared to be blessed by the Spirit that inspired them.”
—Dr. David G. Benner, author of *Soulful Spirituality* and *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*. Website: www.drdavidgbenner.ca

“Throughout Harold Ellens' life he has been called professor, doctor, and colonel. Yet, Ellens is never happier than when people know him as pastor. He is a man who loves to preach the good news of the Bible; something he clearly articulates as grace which is universal, unconditional, and radical. Yet, for Harold preaching is not reserved for the pulpit. His students know that God's grace is available to everybody. His patients know that God loves them no matter what. The soldiers he counsels straight from the battlefields of Iraq know that God's grace gets to the very core of their being and can heal the pain of their souls. However, it is in the traditional setting of a church on Sunday morning where Ellens preaches the message of grace with a craftsmanship honed over sixty years of service as a priest. All of his sermons are written with love and experience, and are always

aesthetic, humorous, intelligent, relevant, and life changing. It has been a pleasure to read this book."
—Dr. Virginia Ingram, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

"Dr. Ellens' resources are inexhaustible. Now he offers us a collection of provocative sermons for Ordinary Time(s). He breathes new life into our preaching by sermons that both enrich and challenge. He calls us back to the radical nature of God's grace at a time when we are not sure that it speaks to our age. I highly recommend this book to anyone, lay or professional, who deals with God's gracious relationship with us."
—LeRoy Aden, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care, Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Author of *Guilt and the Search for Fulfillment*.

"These sermons will inspire from the full power of grace, teach highlights of relevant biblical research with clarity of insight, and counsel the broken heart with meaning from out of the depths of a blend of mature psychology and the rich heritage of Christian thought and struggle. They are the fruit of a professional ministry which counsels with expertise, teaches with academic rigor, and dares to preach with prophetic sensitivity."
—Jack T. Hanford, Th.D., Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies. Ferris State University.

"In twenty-seven sermons, J. Harold Ellens provides in this volume a lucid, challenging, and inspiring demonstration of the art of preaching. Every page bears testimony to the professional background and life experience of the author, as professor of theology and philosophy, as pastor, as U.S. Army Colonel, as psychologist and founding editor of *The Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, as research specialist in ancient Near-Eastern studies, as prodigious author, and as past master of the pulpit. He has preached "the Word" in 11 different countries from India to South Africa, Brazil, Australia, Great Britain, Germany, and Estonia. The sermons in this volume attest to Ellens' controlling theme that the irrepressible human hunger for meaning is universal and that Scripture addresses this hunger in unanticipated, grace-filled, and saving ways."
—Wayne G. Rollins, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Assumption College; Adjunct Professor of New Testament, Hartford Seminary.

"As a parishioner privileged to attend to Dr Ellens' preaching, I found my understanding of Christianity overturned and re-formed by his themes of radical grace, wholeness, health, and the enjoyment of life. In later years I have never seen a congregation pay more rapt attention to a sermon than when he was a guest preacher at our small congregation of retired Florida sunbirds. I think you, too, will be entranced and energized as this series of sermons expounds the themes of grace."
—David Gritter, MS, Mechanical Engineer, Devoted Churchman, Lay-Theologian, and long-time Ruling Elder.

"In these sermons one finds far more than a preacher's facility with words. These sermons embody soulful and genuine response to sacred texts. Jay Harold Ellens' attentive love for these scriptures is evident; the vision they inspire is clear and compelling. Addressing basic Christian truths these sermons inform the mind and strengthen the spirit."
—Ralph Underwood, PhD, Professor Emeritus of Pastoral Care, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

"Imaginative, informal, engaging, informed, playful, and confronting, Hal Ellens' sermons will make you laugh and cry – and stay awake, because he cuts through to issues that matter. Keen to see that "the center holds", as he puts it, he keeps coming back to "unconditional and universal grace and love", which both preserves the connection with the text and the connection with us, the readers. From the experience and wisdom of 60 years of preaching – a gift to savor!"
—William Loader PhD, FAHA, Emeritus Professor, Murdoch University, Western Australia

"A fine collection of scholarly sermons presented over time noting major societal changes that engage one's interest. Refreshing and most thoughtfully presented for one to ponder. An occasional sentence of wit and a dry humor sneaks in and you find yourself checking the scriptures. We're reminded how our stories blend with the Jesus story and what matters is the message. The Holy Spirit has been at work a long time and good sermons are truly a gift."
—Helen Morrison, a Professional career consultant, Presbyterian Elder, Presbytery Staff Person, Director of Christian Education, Pastoral Associate, General Assembly Council, and President, Presbyterian Older Adult Ministry Network.

"Harold Ellens' *Radical Grace* is that if we really read the Bible, the Christian mandate turns out to be: Live with abandon, God's abandon. Live in abandonment of that inner voice that says we are not good enough, and God's love could never be for us. Grace is given to all without any constraint. There is the radical aspect of this message: it is given to all humanity of all descriptions, just as they are – whether we like it (or them) or not! To live with God's abandon is to understand that it is God who is our worth and who gives it to everybody without exception, including the direst enemies who have yet no faith in God. Ellens has captured the intent of creation and the intent and outcome of the journey from Eden to the New Jerusalem. We are going to have to give up a lot of presuppositions and prejudices to read and appreciate this book of sermons. However, if you can do that without throwing it down in rebellion against that challenging message, the prize at the end is grace, that came in person, for you personally. God cannot resist you; can you resist God, as God comes to you through Ellens' soul-challenging sermons?"
—Kamila Blessing, PhD, Episcopal priest, New Testament scholar, and Author of *Speak Ye First the Kingdom*

“Radical grace: the action of God. Radical change: the response of people. These are the two themes that run through all of these sermons by Hal Ellens. Readers—both clergy and laity—will find here a depth of biblical insight and spiritual imagination that will enrich the entire Christian year of worship events. These are sermons that will nurture and inspire an individual and a congregation.”
—John M. Mulder, former President of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“There is a Jewish saying, "Whatever is not in the Torah is not in the world." Hal Ellens knows the world, and he knows his Bible. He has been tested and tried by life, so he uses life to interpret the Bible and the Bible to interpret human existence. He is a theologian who combines scholarship with empathy and compassion. Whoever reads his sermons with an open mind and an open heart will be nourished and enlightened.”
—Schuyler Brown, Anglican Priest and Professor Emeritus, Toronto, ON, Canada

“These sermons, drawing on Ellens' rich experience as a pastor and counsellor, combine psychological insight with spiritual wisdom.”
—Professor Richard Bauckham, FBA, FRSE, Professor of Biblical Studies, St Andrews and Cambridge Universities, UK

INTRODUCTION

These sermons are a product of 60 years of preaching and 70 years of mastering the sacred scriptures and the ancient languages in which they were originally given to the world. My theological perspective has grown, developed, and matured during those decades. The present form of these messages is an expression of my present perspective on the things of God. I was raised in a very conservative community of faith that depended more on its theological tradition and its ethnic value system than on a need to listen afresh to the carefully crafted cadences of the biblical text.

My present perspective retains almost none of the formal constructs of those formative years, except a devout reverence for and appreciation of the Bible as a report on profound spiritual experience in very self-aware communities who perceived that God was present to them in their very human journey in history. Through the decades in which I have redigested the traditions of my youth and expanded vastly the scope of my learning and understanding of these things of God, I have found the essence of my faith surfacing with increasing clarity. The peripheral has fallen away. I suppose that is the inevitable process of growing up with a perpetually inquiring mind while cast providentially into life circumstances that stimulated and challenged newer and more relevant ways of thinking things out. The important thing is that the center has held. God is in Christ reconciling the world unto God's self by the kind of universal grace we cannot escape.

I heartily reject most of the historic constructs of Christology. I am convinced that most of it has been the Church's unconscious temptation to escape into an intellectualized construction of the Christian faith. This is an escape from an openness to the vital and life giving divine spirit. I am certain that the concepts of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, when applied to God should be understood as metaphors for the modes in which God shows up in history. When the church began to use those metaphors as ontological definitions of the essential nature of the divine, it created a theological idolatry. When the church proceeded from there to formulate its Christology as historically presented, Jesus Christ became an idol that obstructed our ability to see God, instead of a lens for viewing a crucial aspect of God's manifestation in history. The ancient creeds are an unfortunate mechanism for this misstep of the historic church. In those

creeds the bishops attempted to take the biblical Hebrew metaphors and translate them into Neo-Platonic Greek philosophical definitions. That got the church off on a tragic track of misconceiving the biblical vision.

In John 14 Jesus made it clear that the age of Christ had ended and the age of the spirit had begun. He enjoined us to let the spirit lead us into all the truth. The church urgently needed, as Tertullian contended in the third century, a theology of the Divine Spirit: a Pneumatology, not a Christology. However, the church escaped from the Spirit because the Divine Spirit was impossible to quantify and control. Jesus himself said, "The Spirit blows where it will. You can hear the sound of it, see the effects of it; but you cannot tell whence it comes and wither it goes. So is everyone who is born of the spirit" (Jn 3).

The Divine Spirit is scary for some folks and it is dangerous to the organizational stability of institutions, so the church escaped into the propositions of Christology and created a mythology from which the world is now moving away - rejecting the Church and its dogma. Everywhere now we hear folks saying authentically that they are no longer religious but they are spiritual. That disaffection from the historic church and its traditions of faith is a direct result of the misstep in the fourth century. That creedal shift of the faith from the heart to the head, from life attuned to the Divine Spirit to life imprisoned in an orthodox theological box.

It is urgently necessary that people of faith now appreciate the import of developing an understanding of God as the Divine Spirit who is pervasive throughout all creation, the life-force in all living things, and the presence of Spirit in every human spirit. God is Spirit and they that worship God must worship God in Spirit and in truth" (Jn 4). To use a rather clumsy philosophical term for it, we should all be converted to Panentheism. That means we should begin to realize God as the energy, force, agent, vitality, and mindful presence that is evident in all God's material universe as the creating, sustaining, energizing, and guiding dynamo – the soul of which the material world is the bodily manifestation. If we could develop that sense of the presence of God with us in all things, we would rather automatically realize the exciting anticipation of how the Divine Spirit will show up around the next corner in our lives. God as Spirit always does for those who have "the eyes to see and ears to hear."

I think I have discerned over the 80 years of my life what I consider to be an ironic psychology joke. Many of my colleagues who started out as I did in what may as well be called American Fundamentalism or rigidly conservative biblicistic theological traditions and narrow ethnic value systems, still care much about the questions of biblical truth and the

issues of authentic personal spirituality, after decades of wrestling for a better understanding. Many others have given up on the key questions or fallen away. Some of us have matured far beyond those early primitive constructs, but we know what the questions are and we look for answers that honestly address those questions without abandoning the heart's hunger for spiritual meaning. Many other colleagues who started out in a much more enlightened and, should I say, liberal Christian faith and culture also continue to pursue the path of progressive enlightenment and concerned growth, while others seem now after all these decades no longer to care about the essential questions of personal spirituality, the nature of God, and the quality of our relationship to God. They seem to be off somewhere in the trivial formalities of socio-political quandaries. They seem more preoccupied with ecology, climatology, and sociology than with pneumatology. Those things are important, but we shall never make sense out of them without a clear sense of how they are issues first of all of the presence of the Divine Spirit in our lives and world.

It is my fervent prayer that these sermons may provide new eyes and ears for discerning the presence of the Spirit; and move some inquiring souls to experience the power and presence of God as the all pervading Divine Spirit.

All Saints Day / Reformation Day 2012

Sermon One

God's Radical Grace: Micah 7:18-20 (19c), Jeremiah 31:33

> Who is a God like our God? He pardons iniquity and he passes over transgression. He will not keep his anger forever. He delights in steadfast love. He is faithful to us when we are unfaithful to him. He tramples our iniquity under his feet and casts all our sins into the depths of the sea. Moreover, he guaranteed that to us through our ancestors from the days of old (Micah). I will put my law within you and I will write it upon your hearts. I will be your God and you shall be my people (Jeremiah).

In the dark dank dawn of a misty morning in April of 1963 the steel grey hulk of a US Navy ship loosed its moorings from the pier at Groton, Connecticut. It drew silently out of the harbor and cut its way keenly into the choppy waves of the north Atlantic. It was a gallant ship and it had 127 fine young red-blooded American men on board. It was the USS Thresher, the navy's first atomic submarine. This was its maiden voyage, its shake-down cruise.

The Thresher made its rendezvous that morning with the mother ship at the appointed time, somewhere in the vastness of the north Atlantic. It began immediately with the prescribed sea trials: Identification of Friend and Foe (IFF), target acquisition and attack, depth soundings, silent pursuits, communication drills, mock missile launches, and various battle tactics. At 2:14 that afternoon the real test came: a high speed dive to a still classified depth far below 2000 feet, secured in radio silence.

It was a gallant ship with the most sophisticated technology in the world. Her superb ships-company was made up of well trained men and they knew what they were doing. All went very well for nearly an hour as that fine ship and her 127 men drove steeply toward the bottom of the sea. Then suddenly at 3:13 the airways crackled with a desperate call, apparently from the Thresher: an SOS from a radio man, sent in high volume, but broken off suddenly in the middle. After that there was ominous silence!

The mother ship activated all her powerful communications machinery to reestablish contact with the Thresher; but there was only silence. Silence all that afternoon – as the mother ship notified Naval Headquarters in Groton, Washington, and Norfolk. Silence reigned all that night as the US Navy flexed her mighty muscle round the world in a desperate effort to rescue the Thresher and her men. But there was only silence all the next day as deep submersibles were brought to the site from Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Silence all that week! Silence to all eternity!

That gallant ship and her 127 men was sunk in the depths of the sea. They were lost! Gone! Erased, as though they had never been! What is sunk in the depths of the sea cannot be recovered. It cannot again be retrieved, cannot be resurrected. It cannot be brought back, for good or ill. What is lost in the depths of the sea is erased.

Micah declares that God has cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. All our broken relationships, betrayals, failures to achieve God's ideal for us, all covenant breaking attitudes, and God forsaking behavior are erased from the equation of our relationship with God. They are lost! Gone! Erased! They can never be recovered. They cannot be resurrected against us ever again: all our sins are erased as though they had never been. God thinks we are saints. So Jeremiah can say with confidence, "God injects a new covenant – hence, a new consciousness - into our hearts. A new law God writes in our hearts which says 'They are my people in spite of themselves. That is the divine law.'" That is all there is to it! Who is a God like our God?

Micah lived long before John wrote his gospel lines which say that the old law came through Moses, but this grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Jeremiah and Micah both lived at times of enormous turbulence and moral tragedy in Israel. In Micah's day the power people in Israel would sell the poor for a pair of shoes. The prophet said that the smoke of their sacrifices was, consequently, a stench in the nostrils of the Almighty. It was a time of a covenant-breaking and God-forsaking community.

Micah knew that if he were to cause a real change in Israel he needed to change people at the heart. To do that he needed to find a memorable metaphor that would stick in their psycho-spiritual gullets so they could not cough it out. He knew he had to free them from their fear, guilt, and shame so they could spend their psychological and spiritual energies on growing toward God. So he picked this unforgettable image. God has cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. The Apocalypse of St. John calls it the sea of God's eternal forgetfulness.

Other metaphors would not work. Micah might have said that God fires our sins off into outer space; But God does not shoot our sins in

hermetically sealed capsules into the far reaches of the universes. Even Micah knew already then that what goes up must come down. Remember Apollo 13 which was hit by a meteorite near the moon and was teased back to earth over a three day period without its power systems working. Moreover, Micah did not picture God burying our sins in the sands of the sea shore at ebb tide. He knew even in his day what always happens to hidden pirates chests. They eventually wash up and are hauled into court as evidence against the scoundrels who buried the stolen treasure. Only *this* memorable metaphor will work to tell God's real story. God has cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Gone, lost, erased, never recoverable, never resurrected against you again!

So that is Micah's memorable metaphor and Jeremiah's radical concept of covenant, the covenant of divine grace written upon the human heart. What, then, is the message here? Why, of course, that with God to forgive is to forget. God looks at you and me, indeed, at every human being, and God cannot remember that we are sinners, inadequate and flawed humans, who continue to fall short of the mark. God has forgotten that we are the people who, in Paul's words, always come short of the glorious destiny God has designed for us, made as we are in God's image. God looks at us and sees only admirable saints.

The memorable message of Micah and Jeremiah is the same as Jesus' message in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The popular German preacher and theologian after WW II, Helmut Thielicke, said this should really not be known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There are two sons in trouble in the parable. Thielicke said that this is a parable about the Waiting Father. It turns out remarkably in that parable, for both the prodigal son and for his elder brother, as well, that the issue at stake is never a question of the father's unconditional acceptance of the sons; but always the question of their capacity for unconditional acceptance of the father's unconditional acceptance of them.

That is our predicament – as it was for ancient Israel. So Micah's marvelously memorable metaphor brings precisely the meaningful message Jeremiah wanted to nail down, once and for all. What is that meaning? We cannot sin ourselves out of God's grace. We cannot squirm out of God's long embrace. Nobody can! Ever! Forever! God's grace is that radical, and that unconditional, and that universal.

So the reason to be one of God's people is not to save your bloody soul from hell. The only reason to be a Christian is because it is more fun. It is more fun to live all of life, through all its ups and downs, in the full assurance of God's grace. Being a Christian is not a command but an invitation; not an obligation but an opportunity, not a burden to be labored

under and sweated out for a lifetime but a possibility to be seized and celebrated, now and forevermore.

Most of us do not want such radical grace. I do not want such radical grace. If grace is that radical and God's acceptance and forgiveness of me is that unconditional, then I must give up the conditionality of my relationship with you, regardless of your character, quality, race, creed, or gender. I must embrace you in spite of yourself, and open myself to such an equal embrace from you.

Moreover, I do not like such radical grace for another reason. It means I have no ultimate control over my ultimate destiny in my relationship with God. I cannot be an illustrious churchman for 60 years and secretly think in my heart that it gives me some leverage with God. I cannot live my life all week in charity and grace and then on Saturday night grab God by the shirt collar and declare, "God, you owe me!" Like the prodigal son, I cannot even sign up to do God's will and work as God's servant, *in order to earn credit with God* and insure God's favor toward me. God insists that to God I look like God's son no matter what I have done with my life.

Notice that remarkable moment when the prodigal returns! His father had been looking down that dusty road every day hoping, praying, and waiting to see his son again. Thus the father saw the son before he saw his father. The father ran to him and embraced him; but the son pushed him away and declared, "I am unworthy to be called your son, let me be your hired man. Let me work for you and thereby prove to you that, despite my misbehavior, deep down inside I really am a good guy." That son had trouble accepting unconditionally the unconditional acceptance of his father. He believes he would have more power in the relationship equation if he could hire onto the work force and so prove himself worthy of honor and esteem. He could not imagine simply accepting his own inherent worthiness just because he is his father's son in spite of his behavior. The father, however, insists, "You are not my son because of *your* character or behavior but because of *my* character and behavior as your father. You are my son as long as I insist on fathering you, and I will never let you go." So they killed the fatted calf and threw a big feast of celebration that the wastrel had returned.

Of course, the elder brother proves to have a big problem with this. He refused to come to the celebration for his brother's return. Typical of his father, he went out to the elder brother and asked him why he would not celebrate. The elder brother spit bitterly through his teeth, "All these years I have done my duty and you never celebrated me." To this the father replied in effect, "Son, you have the same problem as your brother. You think you are my son and have my esteem because you did your duty? You

think you have *earned* your way into my favor as my son by behaving yourself in keeping with conservative traditions? All that I own is yours. Your brother took his inheritance long ago. You know that you are really working for yourself – your own gain and reputation. I esteem you for that. But if your reason for your faithfulness as a good churchman for 60 years is to earn my love and grace, you should have raised more hell.

Your status as my son does not depend upon your having done your duty. Your sonship does not depend upon your behavior, quality, or character as my son. It depends upon my behavior, quality, and character as your father. You cannot sin yourself out of my grace nor squirm out of my long embrace. That is because of the quality of my love for you, in spite of yourself. You should have raised more hell! You are too worried about appearances and prescriptions. You are angry because we are celebrating the prodigal's return. Don't you know that he was dead to me and he is alive again? He was lost to me and he is found! Nothing else counts!"

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWO

THE BACKSIDE OF GOD: EXODUS 33:21-23

You cannot see God's face and live.
You will see the shadow of God's backside.

God is very hard to see. When I look back on the 80 years of my life I can see the moments of the presence of God. The pattern, nonetheless, is very subtle. All the things that I thought were the crucial influences forming and informing my life have turned out to be relatively irrelevant. I would have pushed and shoved them into place with might and main but they have had little useful consequence for me or others. On the other hand, the things that I thought were the great inadvertencies, frustrating difficulties, or even tragedies of my life, from which God would have protected me had God any brains at all, have turned out to be the hinges of my destiny. I think that only once was it true that at the moment that they were happening I could see their critical importance. Moreover, except for that one instance, I have only been able to see in retrospect the golden thread of God's presence or guidance. When I can see it at all it is only when I look back to try to make sense out of what seemed senseless. The reason is that God's presence to us in this world is incredibly subtle.

It is probably a good thing that God is so subtle. If God suddenly showed God's self plainly and unequivocally, every other day, once a week, once a year, or a couple of times in a lifetime, probably that would not be good for us. It might very well be counterproductive. We would most likely forget the content of the experience and concentrate instead upon the spectacular drama of the event. When we experience an event that dramatically suggests that it could be explained in no other way than that it is "of the Lord," we are thoroughly persuaded of it at the time. Then, said C. S. Lewis, we spend the next six weeks rationalizing it away.

More likely, if God stepped out boldly and plainly before us, we would simply set up a shrine and thereafter worship the shrine where God had appeared. The Israelites of the Hebrew Bible always seemed to be playing around the edges of doing that very thing. So God was always busy

destroying their shrines and idols, as God is always busy frustrating us in our efforts to concretize God, to make God more obvious, and to satisfy the deep inner hunger of our souls by means of a more tangible and palpable experience of God's presence.

We tend to think we might be able to capture God in our creeds and theological constructs and pop God into our vest pockets and keep God there, well defined and, therefore, well controlled. Preachers and theologians, unfortunately, have made a major case out of getting God incarcerated in our theological propositions. I often wonder if we are trying to keep God close or keep God at bay. Of course, we are all tempted to throw a large interpretational net over God and haul God into our own private or denominational world view.

Moses tried to do exactly that in Exodus 33:12-23. "Moses said to the Lord ... 'I pray ... show me now your ways that I may know you ...,' and [God] said, 'My provident presence will go with you ....' And [Moses] said to him, 'If your provident presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here ....' And the Lord said to Moses, 'I will do exactly this thing you have requested ....' Moses said, '... show me your glory (true and full nature).' And [God] said, 'I will make all my goodness (cherishing presence) pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name, "The Lord" ... but you cannot see my face. A human cannot look me in the face and survive .... Look, there is a place close to me, a rocky crest, where you may stand; while my sustaining presence passes by I will place you in a cleft of that rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand and you shall see my backside but not my face."

God is *intentionally* hard to see.

Exploring the Subtlety

William James, the great psychologist at the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, and Gordon Alport after him, said that there are two kinds of spirituality: extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic spirituality is the sense of satisfying spiritual experience that we get from the projects, activities, worship events, and liturgies of our religion: the things we can act out in our religious practice. Some people find those completely satisfying and prefer them to intrinsic spirituality which has to do with the heartfelt, deep inner sensations of hunger for God and communion with God.

My father was both an extrinsic and intrinsic Christian while my mother was more profoundly intrinsic spiritually. My father was a thoughtful lay-theologian. My mother was a pietist. In any case, all of us

extrinsic and intrinsic believers, somewhere in our souls, long for a clearer, deeper, steadier signal, and a more certain trumpet – a more tangible experience of God's presence. However, God does not give us much satisfaction on that. God is consummately subtle, extremely hard to see. You really have to search God out; and you have to spend a long time at it to make sure the intimations of God's presence make any sense. Most of all you have to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

Moses was quite sure that he had seen God at the burning bush. He was quite sure he had gotten his commission right. So he went to Egypt and he did all of the things he was supposed to do. He raised the revolution and led the children of Israel out of Egypt. By the time of this story in Exodus 33 he had been leading them for a couple of decades. Then it came to him that he was not quite so sure about things as he thought he had been. He was not sure he had seen God since the burning bush, and that was a long time back. Was that really God he had seen? He was busy rationalizing away his spiritual mountain top experience. So he challenged God for being so subtle.

He said "I want to see your face." You've been sneaking around the edges of our lives here for all these years. You intimate that you are leading us somewhere and we are not getting anywhere. In fact it is clear that the people would rather worship a tangible golden calf than keep up this subtle quest for your presence and your promised land. We want to see you face to face. We want some clear signal - a concrete God we can experience. We are on the cusp now of jumping off into the final attack. We are ready to cross the river Jordan and go into the Promised Land. However, that promise seems less and less clear, more and more uncertain, because your trumpet is muffled. It is very hard to see you. It is hard to discern whether what we thought was you, really was you. We are beginning to wonder if the notion of the Promised Land really was your idea revealed to us, or our idea conjured upon in our imagination.

We cannot quite determine whether you are our projection of some kind of in inner psychological wish. Are you really our perception or our projection of who is guiding and leading us? "Show us your glory!" The Hebrew word used here for glory means "your whole nature, character, and operation." Moses was insisting on what we all want, and what we all seek at some sub-cognitive level. Moses continued, in effect, to say, "Lay out before us once and for all the total picture of what in the world you are up to, God!"

God replied to Moses in this story by promising, "I will do what you ask. I will show myself to you; in fact I have already done so. However, you cannot see my face and survive: my full nature and work. If I showed

you everything that I have been up to in the last 10,000 years, and particularly in the twentieth century, you would not be able to sort it out or take it in. If I showed you how I was present in the prosperity of your life and in the impairment of your child, in the death of your loved one and in the rise of Hitler and Stalin. If I gave you a snapshot of the total picture of how I am present in all of that stuff' of history, and what I am up to, it would be so overwhelming to you that you would not be able to come away with any kind of integrated sanity. Do you really want to see how I was in the 150 million WW II human deaths, to say nothing of all the animals?"

There is no suggestion in this passage that God causes any of the suffering and tragedy of life and history, but it suggests that God was present to it and was not absent from it. "If I laid all of that before you in one presentation you would be distracted and overcome. Only I, God, can handle all the extremities of history and continue to function. I will show myself to you but you cannot look me full in the face. You cannot read my whole story. You cannot see my full and true nature and survive it. I will tell you what I will do. I will put you in the cleft of the rock near me, and I will put my hand over you, and then I will pass by. After that I will take my hand away and you will see the shadow of my passing. You will see my backside."

Moses wanted to see God face to face. So did Elijah. So did Isaiah. Isaiah said that in the year that King Uzziah died, he saw God in the temple and God's *train* filled the temple, the tail end of God's regal robe. That is all that Isaiah got to see: God's tail end. Elijah thought he had seen God on Mt. Carmel when he defeated the prophets of Baal. It turns out, according to the angel that spoke to Elijah, that God does not live on Mt Carmel. He lives on Mt. Horeb. Elijah had a bad map. When Elijah went down to Jerusalem after the spectacular events on Mt. Carmel, he expected God would have changed everything, but nothing had happened to change things in Jerusalem.

Elijah began to wonder if it really was God who had acted on Mt. Carmel to destroy the prophets of Baal. Baal worship was still flourishing with official sanction in Jerusalem. He wondered if God intended to deliver his people in Jerusalem from Ahab and Jezebel and give the Israelites the renewed spirituality that Elijah wanted for them, but Jezebel was still killing the prophets of God. At least, it seemed to Elijah that if God was up to anything redemptive, God was awfully subtle and hard to see. So Elijah went to Mt. Horeb, as the angel suggested, and when he got there some dramatic things started to happen immediately. An earthquake tore the mountain apart. He thought God was in the earthquake but God

was not in the earthquake. Then a mighty storm came and Elijah thought God was in the storm but God was not. Suddenly the mountain was set afire by a mighty stroke of lightening. Elijah thought God was in the fire. God was not in the fire. God was nowhere in all that drama.

When Elijah was ready to give up he heard a whisper. He discovered that God was in the still, small voice of subtle intimation whispering in his own head and heart. That quiet voice whispered: "Get back Jerusalem. Stop your self-pity and acting like you think you are the Lone Ranger, goofing off here on Mt. Horeb. Get to work. There are 7000 people in Jerusalem who have not bowed the knee to Baal. They are busy building my kingdom and you are lying around here feeling sorry for yourself and looking for divine magic. Moreover, I have knocked down two kings and set up two new ones. I have appointed your successor, as well, while you have been out of commission." God is usually awfully subtle. All this came to Elijah in a whisper, once he finally got the ears to hear.

A Personal Journey to the Backside of God

Six weeks after I completed my duties with the Health Services Command of the United States Army in 1989, I was recalled to field a plan that I and my staff had written for the mobilization of special staff officers in the event of a national emergency. The issue was to discover where we could find the beds and professional people in the event of war. How were we going to man the slots available for them? How were we going to get enough slots for enough people? How were we going to fund the personnel and train them in time? What I did not know at that time was that the president was getting ready for the First Gulf War.

I reported to Fort Sam Houston. They gave me six weeks to field the plan. I worked very hard for those six weeks and the last night of my tour, I was putting the final touches to the program. Unfortunately it was on a computer that I did not understand, and that operated with an unconventional army operating system with its own unique character and personality. I was working very late.

At two o'clock in the morning there was a sharp thunderstorm in San Antonio, Texas and it knocked out the power and wiped out my entire program. I gave up. I went to the BOQ and fell into exhausted sleep from the ardor and disappointment of the day. I awoke from a dead sleep the next morning hearing the band play on the parade field. It was introducing the retirement ceremony at which I was supposed to give the opening prayer. I flung my body into the shower, stripped on my uniform, ran

across the parade ground, and then discovered my way blocked by a lot of soldiers doing PT.

I circled around trying to take as good a short cut as I could. As I did so I saw three young solders standing over to the left. They were obviously having some kind of difficulty. I slid over toward them as I ran along and I noticed that one of them, a young woman, was weeping vigorously. I stopped and asked if there was anything I could do. One of them said, “Rachel just heard from home and her girl friend committed suicide, the eighteenth suicide of an adolescent woman in that town in four years."

The young soldier was devastated. I pointed out to her the building across the street where my office was, told her to meet me there at 10 o’clock and I would do what I could. Since it was my last day and I had to check out at noon, I referred her, after a long session of pastoral counseling, to one the permanent Chaplains. She was well cared for by him and handled the grief and tragedy constructively.

Now if my computer had not blown at two o’clock in the morning, I would not have gotten up late. I would not have been running across the parade ground. I would have been walking sedately along the sidewalk, as a proper army Colonel. I would not have encountered that young woman and I would not have been able to intervene in her life. Was that an accident? Or was that serendipity? Or was that the Spirit guiding? God is very hard to see as far as I can figure out.

I had to go to South Africa to lecture. I flew to New York and after a couple of hours proceeded to board the South Africa Airlines plane for Johannesburg. As I was going up the ramp I was stopped by the woman who was processing the loading of the South African flight. She looked at my visa and my ticket and she said “I’m sorry I cannot let you board. Your visa is not correct.” I said “It must be correct. I have spent weeks making certain that everything is just right.”

“No it is not. You must go to the consulate in New York City and get it corrected. I cannot let you on the plane because on the other end, they fine the airline $10,000.” So I had a deadline for lecturing and preaching that weekend in South Africa, and of course South African flights only go every other day. I quickly went downtown. I turned in my passport and visa and asked them to correct it. For some reason they were very resistant, probably because of my exasperated attitude at that point. They just simply were not going to do it. There was this problem, there was that problem, obviously they were sandbagging the thing, trying to buy enough time to find out who this clown was named J. Harold Ellens.

In frustration, I decided to get a hotel. As I walked out of the consulate lobby in walked a dear friend of mine. He had been at the South African

consulate in Chicago for a number of years. I had been to South Africa a number of times largely through his offices. He said “Hey what’s up” and I said “I have a problem with my visa.” At that point he was the Deputy Consul in the NY consulate. He could get anything done that he wanted done. So in about 10 minutes he had resolved all problems with my visa and passport. He said “Well you caused quite a stir around here. Here is your corrected visa, and here is a seat on the next plane," a special flight going out the next morning. He gave me a first class seat. He said “I’m sorry I had to bump off a college kid who was standby anyway.”

I went to the airport early the next morning and was informed that the plane would be two hours late. There was virtually no one in the airport, except the woman who had thrown me off the plane the day before. I walked up to her and said “Where is the insurance desk? I want to buy some insurance.” She said “I don’t know. Those people are not here this morning. However yesterday you gave me your card. It says that you are the Executive Director of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies. What is this business of Christian and Psychological?”

I said, “Well that is me and that is what I do.” I explained it to her. She said, “I need to talk to you. I have worked for British Airways for 20 years. I have the best job in the world. I have a magnificent apartment in Manhattan. I have enough money to collect art works from all over the world. I have a beautiful place, a beautiful life. I fly anywhere I want to go. I take vacations in the most exotic places – and every morning when I get up I want to kill myself. I was born out of wedlock from an American solder and a Dutch woman, and abandoned at birth. I lived in orphanages until I was 16, repeatedly sexually abused. Finally I got mad at the world and determined to take charge of my own destiny. I ran away from the orphanage, went to another city. I signed up at a University. I now speak seven languages. I have a master’s degree and I really have been able to achieve what I wanted in my life; but every morning I want to kill myself.” I said “How old are you?” She said “I am 48.”

I continued my conversation with her for two hours until I boarded the plane. Then I said: “I will write you a letter as soon as I am on the plane. You write back to me.” I told her that I would not give up on her and she should not give up on me. We carried on this correspondence for about a half year. During that time I referred her to a friend, a Psychiatrist in New York, who treated her very successfully for the diagnosis that I had given her, namely, severe depression and paranoia associated with menopause. It was a matter of bio-chemistry. She was short on estrogen. When she received the medical supplements and appropriate supportive care, she did very well, in spite of her early developmental trauma. Now she has her

wonderful life back. Was that an accident that my visa was all messed up? Or was that serendipity? Or was that the intervention of the Divine Spirit?

Moses was really confused by this kind of stuff. So am I. So are you. We want to see God face to face. We want to have a clear signal. We want to have deep and profound assurance of his presence. We want the eyes to see, the ears to hear. We are all willing to live like pilgrims, to take one day at a time, to keep an open ended quest for truth and insight. We are all ready to pay that price, if we could just see God. But God said to Moses, "You cannot see me that clearly. It would be too weighty for you. But I will tell you what I will do – when the storms of life rage over you, there is a place near me, a cleft in the rock. I will hold you in the cleft of the rock, and I will put my hand over you, and then the full force of life can pass by. I will pass through your life with all of the power and majesty and mystery and awesomeness of my nature. Then I will take my hand away and if you have the eyes to see and the ears to hear, you can see the shadow of my backside.

When I was five years old, I was madly in love with Esther Van Houten. Esther was also five. She lived in the farmstead across the country road from ours. We talked that summer of 1937 about starting school together in September. We were very excited. We were very happy. We were very much in love, and the summer was nice, bright, and sunny. I remember the wonderful days of sunshine. I am sure there were days of rain, but I do not remember them. Esther was five in April. I was five in July. We were headed for the first grade. No kindergarten there.

On the third of August, I was standing next to the well outside the kitchen window of our farm home. I remember seeing vaguely the image of my mother through the kitchen window on the left. It was a beautiful bright day. I am not quite sure what I was thinking, but I remember I was contemplating something fairly deeply when I heard the screen door slam on the Van Houten home. I remember my heart leaping at the thought that I would run over to play with Esther. It was a great day for that and I looked up to see her. There she stood, at the top of the driveway. She was completely on fire and she burned to death right there before my face.

When Esther died, I died. That was the end of my life. I have no memory for two years, from that day until I was seven, except for the death of my small brother and his funeral six months later. Esther's death changed everything for me. I have no idea now who I was before her death. I cannot recover the memory of what kind of person I was then or might have been had she lived and had we continued our joy. A blackness came down on me that did not lift for two years. I have no recollection of my life during those dreadful years. I do not remember being depressed or

joyful. I remember nothing. My elder brother says I operated like an automaton and I cried constantly. I don't remember.

One morning in mid-summer of 1939 I stepped out of the dimness of the horse stable into the brilliant sun and instantaneously felt myself caught up into an aura of an other-worldly light. It seemed to lift me off my feet. I felt suspended in a pillar of brilliance that not only shown all around me like a cocoon but seemed to shine right through me. In that instant I felt totally illuminated, as though my body were suddenly transparent. Spontaneously the darkness that had immobilized me since Esther's death was literally blown away. Simultaneously, my mind and heart were filled with the most joyful sense of the hopefulness of life before me. I was completely taken up by a vision of immense meaningfulness. I saw myself as intensely productive in helping the people all around me who seemed to be suffering great deprivation and grief. It was the depth of the Great Depression and for some reason many children were dying in our isolated immigrant community.

My spirit and my life felt totally clarified and the prospects before me seemed immensely valuable and gratifying. My whole person was filled with the sense of positive possibilities and purpose. That numinous experience radically changed me, changed my life, and set me on a path that has been a straight line from that moment until this instance, penning these words.

The minister in our community was the only person who seemed to have any power to do anything about human suffering. He seemed the only one from outside of our little Dutch rural ghetto that stood above the anguish of those depression years. He was the only model that seemed empowered to help humans. I was imbued with the sense that his model was my vocation. It seemed like the only possibility for the life that had just been laid out before me. It was clear to me that I was called into the ministry. I suppose that if there had been a heroically esteemed physician in our community, who clearly had the wisdom and ingenuity to definitively help our people in their travail, I would have seen the model of his life as my imperative vocation. There was no such person and so it was natural that the model of the minister loomed large in my sense of things and became the natural shape of what seemed to me to be God's design for my life.

Esther's death changed my life. Everything from that day on has been radically different from what it would ever have been otherwise. Everything that is valuable and useful about me and my life is a result of her death. I am preaching today about God's subtle presence in our lives because Esther burned to death in front of my face and I was helpless to

rescue her. Was that an accident? Or was that serendipity? Or was God in it somehow?

Conclusion

God is so subtle that we would write God off if it were not for the fact that there is not any better hypothesis. Just when we would write God off, there comes soaking into our brains and hearts the awesome awareness that God did not kill Esther Van Houten. But God entered into it. Somehow God was there. What came of it had everything in the world to do with God's presence in it. God did not foul up my visa to the Republic of South Africa but God used it to save the life of a creative woman who had been all together too abused by life in her 48 years. God did not glitch my computer at Fort Sam Houston, but God was not absent from it and God had a suffering waif of a young girl from the upper mid-west in mind.

I think that would make sense to Moses. Apparently he did not write many books. He did not teach theology at an esteemed university. He did not spend a life time, so far as we know, deciphering, reading, explicating, translating, preserving, and publishing ancient texts about God, as I have been compelled to do by my divinely invited vocation in 1939. Nonetheless, he would have been at home in all those roles, I think, had he made his appearance in our century. In any case, he would have appreciated our quest, since it is exactly the same as was his in Exodus 33.

I have noticed in 60 years of work in technical biblical studies that scholars tend to be blighted by, and to blight their work in two ways. As technical textual critics we pour so much energy into the responsibilities of our craft that we repress our own core motive, our personal hunger for that deeper truth and transcendent meaning that Moses was after, while we work with these documents which offer the ancient reflections on those very questions. Moreover, as interpreters of the biblical texts, we easily slide along the surface of mere semantics and linguistics, articulating the memories, meanings, and messages that our ancient scriptures offer, but doing it merely for academic intrigue. It is easy then to leave unexpressed the profound articulations which can strengthen the unraveling moorings of tortured human hearts negotiating the shoals of this tragic adventure of life. Nothing consoles like articulate transcendental poetry. There is little better poetry than the ancient scriptures to speak to the poetic hunger of the human heart for messages and memories with meaning from God.

In a subtle whisper God was present in those crucial inadvertencies of my life. My friends, I can now see God in it all. I look back and I see the shadow of God's backside. God does not cause the suffering and tragedy

but God is present in each event. In fact the only thing that makes any sense at all out of my whole world is the fact that in just that kind of way God has been traversing my life for all these 80 years. God is subtle, indeed, but God's presence is the surest fact of my history.

Amen. So let it Be!

Sermon Three

God's Supreme Court: Zachariah 3:2

"This is a brand that I have plucked from the fire."

I am sure that most of you are acquainted with the name of John Bunyan. That is different from Paul Bunyan, the Michigan lumberjack. John Bunyan wrote a Christian classic about the pilgrimage of being a Christian. He called it *Pilgrim's Progress*. You know the book. If you have not read it, I am sure you would like to do so. It is written as a novel depicting the struggle of the devoted and sometimes tempted and turbulent Christian life. At the critical moment in the unfolding of the plot Pilgrim faces the ultimate challenge. He stands at the river of death. The rushing sounds of the dangerous waters trouble him. It is as though the ultimate enemy is creeping into his soul. Then over the noise of the current he hears a great voice coming from the other side. It says, "God has delivered thee." So "Pilgrim crossed over in safety and joy." That is something like the context of this passage from Zechariah.

It was a peculiar time in history, about 525 BCE. The children of Israel had been carried off into exile in Babylon in 586. Mesopotamia was overrun by the Medes and Persians in 539 BCE. Cyrus the Great became the ruling monarch in Babylon. Cyrus issued an edict, as the prophets of Israel had foretold, that permitted the Israelites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and the temple. About 10 percent wanted to go. The rest had it so good in Babylon that they stayed. In fact the Babylon Israelite community continued to be the most important one in the world for centuries thereafter.

However, there was that 10 percent, that remnant of people with a very special devotion to the city and to the temple in Jerusalem. They wished to return and re-establish something of the society and spirituality of the great golden age of David's kingdom. They returned under the leadership of Zachariah the prophet, Zerubbabel the prince and general, and Joshua the high priest. The first six chapters of Zachariah contain eight visions that came to Joshua. He foresaw something about the way in which the

leading of the Divine Spirit was guiding the Israelites. The visions suggested how they should proceed with the reestablishment of God's society in Jerusalem. In that process this vision in Zachariah 3:2 came into focus.

Joshua found himself standing in the eternal courtroom, the supreme court of almighty God. In his vision he saw on his right hand a figure obviously well prepared to present a case in the court. In Hebrew courts the defense attorney stood on the defendant's right. So the case began to unfold. If you read a little bit between the lines of the text you can see this picture. The defense attorney stepped forward and began to read into the record all the facts of the case. These were facts about the history of God's people. Joshua stood there clothed in rather tattered and filthy garments, representing the sins and iniquities of God's people. He was not a very impressive figure and we wait with baited breath to see the defense counsel defend him. Instead we find out very quickly that the attorney is reading into the record the long history of a covenant breaking, God-forsaking people. It does not take Joshua long to figure out that his "defense counsel" is prosecuting him. The facts of the case are damning.

It turns out that the attorney is Satan. You can see Joshua slowing shrinking, looking more and more despicable as the story unfolds. There seems to be nothing good to say. It is all condemnation. As the story comes to its climax you can feel that the hammer is ready to fall. Joshua is shrinking in his boots.

Suddenly into the middle of the court room strides a figure called the Angel of the Lord. Christian scholars have related the Angel of the Lord with the Logos, the word made flesh in John's gospel (Jn 1:1-3, 14). This angelic representative of God appears frequently in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, as well as in later Jewish literature, and in Philo's writings. Instead of addressing the court this divine agent addressed the attorney who is condemning all the people of God; he says sternly, "The Lord rebuke you, Satan, The Lord who has chosen this people! Humanity is a brand that I have plucked from the fire."

Joshua's filthy garments and tattered turban symbolize the perversity and disordered ways of humankind. Joshua's worn sandals symbolically represent human wickedness. In Joshua you and I stand in judgment. We have met the enemy, as Pogo said, and it is us. Therefore that crescendo of condemnation from the mouth of Satan himself is a condemnation of the people of God of all time. It is your and my indictment and condemnation. It is as though the devil himself is saying, "God, you call these people, your people? It's a bad joke. They don't look like your people, they don't act like your people, they don't think like your people. They are my

people. They look like the devil. They act like the devil. They think like the devil."

Well, he is making an exaggerated case don't you think? I mean we are a fine looking bunch here this morning in the house of God. Where do you think that long record of the court leaves the ancient Israelites? It is easy for us to look back on their history and acknowledge that there is some pretty solid truth to Satan's condemnation. What about the Israelites who rejected Jesus or what about the congregation or the medieval church which forgot largely about personal spirituality and was off into all sorts of project Christianity? Popes preaching celibacy, and living with concubines! Well, there is a lot in the ancient world of God's people and in the medieval church that makes the ring of Satan's condemnation sound at least worth listening to. But here, today, in our nice congregation?

The Angel of the Lord said, "Satan, the Lord rebukes you. You have an incredible style in the courtroom. You have a remarkable memory. You have got all the facts just about right. What a surprising record you keep. There were a number of those facts that I had already forgotten about, or perhaps overlooked in the first place. Sometimes you know, Satan, I pass over transgression, as Micah the prophet said. Sometimes I trample their iniquities under my feet and cast their sins into the depths of the sea of eternal forgetfulness, Satan. You have an incredible memory for negatives. You seem to have remembered everything, except the one fact that counts. These are my people. I chose them. I did not choose them because they are a great people or an impressive people or a faithful people or a devoted people.

I choose all human persons for myself, not because they can do a lot for me but because I can do a lot for them. I chose them in spite of themselves. Don't you understand the one thing that counts in all the world, Satan? Obviously this is the one thing you cannot get through your head. I have snatched them like a brand out of the fire, out of the fires of your kinds of hell.

I have chosen these people as an old piece of abandoned drift wood from the bonfires of hell and I am going to take this piece of drift wood, for all its knottiness and all of its nastiness, and I am going to polish it by my grace and I am going to set it on the mantle of the universe and nobody will ever again be able to miss the beauty of my forgiving grace."

"Satan, you have all the facts right; and you have all the truth and meaning wrong. All humans belong to me. I love them not *because* of their quality and character, but *in spite of* themselves. For I so love the world that I shall never let it perish but assure it eternal life" (Jn 3:15-17)

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON FOUR

GETTING THROUGH CHRISTIANLY: II CORINTHIANS 12:7B-9A

I have a thorn stuck under my skin ...
I prayed three times for God to remove it.
God said, "You can handle it. My grace is sufficient for you.

Paul's words are poignant. "A thorn was given me in the flesh. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this; that it would leave me. But he said to me, 'My Grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.'" It is not hard for most of us to identify with Paul and even empathize on the basis of our own suffering. Every house has its cross, says a Dutch proverb ringing in my ears from youthful memories.

My theme for this morning is "Getting through Christianly". They bombed London again this week. I remember vividly about 70 years ago when the forces of evil in this world bombed London that time. The timing and the situation and the method are a little different, but the objective and the results are the same. The forces of incarnate evil in this world have once again shown their vicious teeth.

Anyone who does not recognize on this Sunday morning that we are fully engaged again in a World War is not oriented to reality. We are in a struggle that has to do with the very nature of our existence and our way of life. The battle is increasingly intensified and it is a battle for truth and decency and democracy. It is a battle between those who wish to undermine humankind, human decency, righteousness, and humaneness; and those who have fashioned the achievements of the last thousand years of civilization in the Western World.

This is a World War and it will take us a couple of decades to win it. It is pernicious. It is more difficult than fighting the Nazis because in this contest we do not know when, where, or from what direction the enemy will strike. The Nazi threat was finite, it was local and it came from a people with a tradition of rationality. This threat comes from an irrational population of people who are largely off the scale in any kind of psychological standard and who are committed to cutting each other's

throats as readily as they are committed to cutting our own. We are caught in a fearsome and remarkably dangerous enterprise and it will take everything that the Western Nations have to offer in imagination, courage, and heroism to ferret out this iniquity and neutralize the forces that foster it. It is therefore an appropriate moment for us to consider how one can get through the ordeal of life Christianly.

It is interesting to me that I selected this theme and scripture for my sermon title three months ago without any idea of what the events of this week would be. In fact, this sermon was scheduled to be preached three weeks ago and because of inadvertent circumstances, ended up being the sermon for today. There must be a kind of divine providence in that.

You know that the central theme of my ministry has always been the theme of grace. We are tempted to define God's grace in terms of God's rescuing us from trial and pain, rather than in terms of seeing God's grace in the providences of joy and freedom. The good news of God's grace, however, is the permeating power of God's word and all pervasive spirit in good times and bad, in times of prosperity and adversity, in times of triumph and tragedy. The grace of God is the atmosphere in which we live and it is the air that we breathe physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Grace is as much the matrix of our existence when we prosper and God's providence leads us through idyllic circumstances, as it is the power and presence of God in tragic times like this week.

There is a wonderful story about the famous theologian, B. B. Warfield, who was lecturing in one of the halls at Princeton Seminary when a friend of his came rushing into the classroom, fell on his knees and begged Professor Warfield to thank God with him for God's providential grace. The man's horses had been scared by a dog on Stockton Street, had run out of control and wrecked his buggy, throwing him out on the street. The team had run away but he had escaped without a scratch. Professor Warfield stopped his lecture, knelt with the man at the podium, and thanked God with him. As he arose he said to the man, "Now I want to tell you a story about God's grace and providence in my life. I have driven my horses down Stockton Street every morning for 40 years and they have never run away." In triumph as well as tragedy, God's grace is the matrix and the air in which we live and breathe.

However today, we are still caught up in this awful memory of the bombing of London, the bombing of 9-11, the bombing of our embassies, and the bombings of our ships. We are up against it. We are at war. Let us start to be realistic about it. It is in life's big moments of stress that we have the opportunity to get God's grace into focus in ways that we cannot otherwise, in ways in which we may see the clear message and meaning of

that second line in our text, "My power is made perfect through weakness."

If there is one peculiar thing about this Third World War in which we are engaged, it is the difficulty of identifying and locating the enemy as target. It is the difficulty in discerning how to move effectively against this nefarious evil force. It is the difficulty of being able to defeat a guerrilla force without losing the very principals of democratic process for which we stand. It is to that perplexity that this text especially speaks. "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is brought to its full manifestation through weakness." That is, as a community of democratic nations in the Western World, we are definitely at a great disadvantage when we are up against this kind of war. The danger is always in the fact that the government will devise too strong a Patriot Act, too aggressive a response to the terrorists acts, too much collateral damage in our responses, too aggressive a method because we are panicked by the fact that we have a great deal of difficulty in specifying the target. There is a great danger that while winning this war, we will lose our own soul as a democratic and God-questing civilization.

Paul's life was shaped by his very dangerous missionary journeys. It was also shaped by the thorn in his flesh. We do not know what that was. We know it was a chronic suffering for him. He prayed repeatedly that he would be delivered from it and God said instead, "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in your weakness." He was imprisoned and that made it tougher for him to hang onto the grace and meaning of his life. He was sometimes nearly ready to give up on the effectiveness of his mission work but he succeeded in spite of it. He saw it as an expression of God's gracious power in him that in spite of the travail through which he had to go, he was able, by God's grace to produce results that were beyond his imagination. What empowered him in his suffering were always things that were beyond his control.

At times of suffering the real issue of grace is most powerfully focused for us. "What does it mean operationally to listen for the Divine Spirit in the face of life's suffering and tragedy? What does it mean to hear God say, 'My grace is sufficient for you?'" How do we come away without feeling like God is merely trivializing our problem? What does it mean in terms of operational reality? What does it mean when you have a life long chronic illness that slowly grinds you away and God says to you, "My grace is sufficient for you"? What does that mean for my youngest daughter who is paralyzed by Multiple Sclerosis? What does it mean for my youngest son whose life will be forever affected by a lethal allergy to almonds?

Divine grace is sufficient for what? "My power is made perfect through your weakness." Well, one thing is for sure and that is that God's saying those things in the Holy Scripture is no guarantee of a relief or promise of miracles and sudden deliverance. My family knows that from first hand experience. In fact, I cannot edit this paragraph today without tears. The words in the Bible are only the acknowledgement of the fact that human pain and tragedy, and our general chronic state of human inadequacy, is a circumstance of suffering *in and through* which, and not necessarily *from* which, God delivers us by an instrument called "grace." We are delivered *in and through* our pain and tragedy not *from* our suffering. We will be delivered through the unfolding tragedies and events of this World War and we will not be delivered from it. So what can it mean then in practical terms for God to say, "My grace is sufficient for you" or "My power is made perfect in weakness?"

Sometimes in our daily lives, for example, death is sudden and tragic. Loss of a child, severe illness, and persistent pain can be beyond our capacity to do anything about it. No amount of love can bring that lost child back and no amount of empathy and sympathy can empower the suffering person to transcend the suffering or somehow escape from it. All that we can do is find a way to help each other through it. Even then helping is a very strange and difficult kind of business with unpredictable results. What we think is helpful is often just more pain for the sufferer.

Christian communities have tended to respond to suffering, pain, and tragedy in a number of ways. The first way is with a kind of a romantic theological world view, rather than facing the real experience. Christians have often supposed that the way to handle suffering and tragedy is to say that somehow this is a gift from God. Well, there may be some sense in which, after the fact, one can look back and say "That was a gift". But it is an obscenity to start out with that rationale. It is no better than the notion that pain is somehow a fate, an act of God's will, built into the structure of the universe.

The Christian community has sometimes turned those kinds of romantic notions into theological constructions, making a world view out of them, as though we are painting in all the details of a picture and then escaping into the picture, into that world view, into that notion that suffering and pain are the will of God imposed upon us. We escape into the picture so we can escape from dealing with reality, the reality of war or of debilitating suffering. Like Alice in Wonderland or the characters in the Narnia Tales we move from reality into an ethereal worldview. Paint a nice romantic picture on the wall of life and then magically walk through the picture into an unreal world. Frequently theology has done nothing

more than that, creating just a head trip of escape from reality. It is a spiritual trap!

Paul would not tolerate that. He said straight out, "I have this thorn in my flesh and I'm really ticked off about it and God will not deliver me. He keeps on saying, 'My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect through your weakness.' Easy thing for God to say!" Or does this scripture really mean something that can change our way of handling this war and all the other suffering in human life. Sometimes the Christian community has been tempted to take a different approach and that is to treat pain in terms of cultural symbolism. That is to say, "Well, *we* believe that God operates in such and such a way in our lives." What counts in suffering is not what *we Christians* believe. What counts for you in your suffering is what *you* believe. I want to know what is working in your soul. What the community believes does not help me unless I can internalize it as reality inside of my own world of pain.

Cultural confessions, civic religion, denominational doctrine can be an escape from reality, an escape into the mindset of a community that has attempted to shift the realities of human suffering into some kind of philosophical code. Christian faith and experience is not a philosophical code. What God is talking about in those words to Paul, "My power is made perfect through your weakness," addresses the issue of how a Christian gets through Christianly in the bite of pain and grief. This has nothing to do with a cultural or communal confession or creed, merely a formulaic escape from reality. A trap!

Sometimes we who believe in God are tempted to take the posture of holding ourselves carefully under emotional control during awful suffering just to meet social expectations. "If you are grieving try to bear up to the social expectations. People expect you to be the person of confidence in the face of the trial, and so forth." I do not have to go into the details of that. You know how we do that. We are all tempted to do that. It is counterproductive, false, and ineffective in dealing with the real experience of life's tragedies.

Getting through Christianly is not a matter of keeping cool and dignified in the face of the bombings in London or of the World Trade Center. It is not a calling to be the dignified preacher when your daughter is dying the hellish death of MS. We ought to be madder than the demons about that and find a way to channel that anger energy into some kind of constructive steam so we can find a way to deal usefully with the problem. God is madder than the demons at MS and we should be too. We should not be dealing in escape mechanisms from the real experience of life's pain: other peoples' pain or our own.

It is particularly obscene to trivialize other peoples' pain. It is dishonest escapism from the awful truth that 58 people were slaughtered in London in cold blood by some miserably vicious evil people who do not care. To hear God say, "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect through your weakness" will not permit us to escape from what it really means to hear the word of God's grace. The real experience is altogether different it seems to me. To hear God say, "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect through weakness" has to mean first of all that God is redemptively present with us when we feel that hope is torpedoed or comfort undermined by pain, and when life is cast under the shadow of death.

When tragedy strikes, the *first thing* that happens to us is that we feel isolation. We feel we are alone in it all. We feel disempowered. God's word, "My grace is sufficient for you and my power is fully manifested through your weakness," means first of all that we are not as isolated and alone in our suffering as the travail makes us feel. I sat before my television set watching the reports on the destruction in London and I felt completely disarmed and hopeless. When I was in the army and part of an organized unit, a group of people who had a policy and a message and a mission, I felt empowered at least. I felt we could do something. But in this case I felt all alone and so did you, I am sure. There I sat, an old retired Colonel, hopeless, helpless, up against it. What can we do?

Suffering makes us feel this terrible isolation. Only I can have my toothache. Only you can do your dying. Only those unfortunate people in that train car, which is still inaccessible this morning, can die or suffer or sit there and wonder what in the world happened. Only you can really know what it means to be suspended between the doctor's announcement that you have a malignancy and the announcement five days later of the strategy for medical or surgical intervention. Nobody else can do those five days of suffering for you. We are very much alone when pain and suffering hit. When God says, "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect through your weakness" God is reaching out to us as our father and our mother in our isolation. God is trying to get across what an extraordinary kind of grace it is that we are embraced and cherished there in the middle of our aloneness. God is as intimate a participant as the soul itself that is suffering. There is nothing about this in which God is not an intimate partner. "See what an extraordinary kind of love it is that God has bestowed upon the likes of us", John says, "that we should be called children of God, and yet that's exactly what we are" (I Jn 3:1a).

The *second thing* that happens to us when tragedy strikes is fear, fear in the psyche and in the soul and in the body. Fear is always shrouded in

guilt. What will happen? What will it feel like? What indignity will it inflict upon us? Can I hold up? How will it go? Fear cuts its icy fingers into our throbbing hearts and always makes us feel guilty. We internalize our pain as guilt, like we did as little children, when we were completely without power to do anything about our suffering. As children we internalized our sense of being fragile and helpless, afflicted and driven into a corner. We internalize it as, "there must be something wrong with me. I must have failed somehow or I must have caused it." The clinical evidence suggests that this is an inevitable process in children. Our communities unconsciously reinforce this when they say, "Well he didn't take his vitamins"; or "He should have exercised more"; or "Why didn't he pray more profoundly"; or "He should have lost weight"; or "He should have rested more; he worked too hard"; or "He should have looked after himself."

The community reinforces this notion of guilt when pain strikes because if I can account for suffering in a rational way it makes me feel that I can avoid it by doing better than the sufferer did. "Those people should have had better security there in London," we are tempted to say. We tell ourselves the lie that it cannot happen to us because we are going to do what should have been done. We are going to watch out.

There, in that fear and guilt, God infuses his unconditional certification that in spite of us and in spite of our circumstance, our human limitations, and our inadequacies, God's grace is sufficient for us. In spite of the fact that we will not be able to protect ourselves perfectly from cancer, bird flu, mad cow disease, old age, and death, God will be present to us in all of that and will make our spirits more powerful by turning our weakness into spiritual insight and awareness of what it means that God is present. I want to know what kind of experience that is operationally.

John Calvin thought that meant that faith is the sure knowledge of God and God's promises and that hanging on to that gets you through. The book of Proverbs says that the name of the Lord, Yahweh, is a strong tower and the righteous run into it and are safe. Yahweh means: God will always be for us what God has always been for us, that faithful, covenant God of grace. We do not need to be perfect or guiltless, comfortable or healthy, faithful or transcendent, in order to be esteemed and loved of God. In our brokenness and in our deformities and in the thorns in our flesh, we are cherished. God says, "My grace is sufficient for you. My unconditional acceptance of you in your broken humanness will give you the consolation and strength to get you through."

The third problem we have when we are struck by pain is that grace is usually in the form of the providence of natural dynamics and not in the

form of miracle. It does not deliver us *from* the evil, but in and through it. That is, it delivers us to a "place of insight and meaning" to which we could not or would not have gotten otherwise or by other means. God is always in the provident and gracious business of reacting to our predicament and reconstructing it into meaningful experience. God is always responding to it, not manhandling it, but infusing it with spiritual insight and understanding. God is against our pain and against death and against the bombings in London and against the evil forces of al Qaeda and the Taliban. God is equally against the evil forces in America.

God is always trying to make sense and meaning out of it for us. "My power is made perfect through your weakness." If we had the power to immediately identify the target in our suffering and if we had the total solution we could blast the problem out of existence. Then we would not even think of God. We would not even think about democracy being the thing that is at stake in this war. We would not even think about the issues of justice and love and healing. We are in a guerilla war just like the grinding ordeal of a bad disease and we cannot blast our way out of our discomfort but are forced to pick our way through it one day and event at a time. So we are going to be forced to rethink the meaning and the crucial importance of continuing our life as a nation in this Western World in a godly, just, and democratic way. God's power in us will be perfected by the very fact of our weakness, by the fact that we do not know how to get this job done quickly or easily or cleanly or neatly, or at all.

We are going to learn an awfully lot about ourselves, about the business of God's kingdom coming, about the experience of enduring in faith-filled trust in God. This will give us patience when life is afflicted by disease and dying. We shall discover much about the business of preserving democracy over the next two decades in the face of this hellishness we are up against, while we endure it and transcend it. In our dead end streets God is busy opening doors of opportunity, windows of vision and insight, and possibilities of strength. It is characteristic of God to meet us in our hopelessness and make meaning out of that. Then we will be able to stand one day and say as I say regarding my life, "How was it that what I thought was the end of my world at least twice in my life, turned out to be the beginning of the real thing?" God's grace is sufficient. God's power shows up best in our weakness.

Finally pain brings sadness, the need to cry a lot, the realization of how fragile humans are. Pain induces sadness in the fact that we can imagine a perfect world, but we can only create a flawed one. We must live with such a malignant world as we see this week. We have to work so hard to make life lovely and keep it that way and then we still cannot. When our

soul wants to escape into the paradise we can imagine, then we have to come back and deal with the life that we have here and in that tragic subway in London.

There is probably no other way for us to come to really realize that "whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." The sufficiency of God's grace is in the fact that right in the middle of all those sad experiences of our humanness God gives us the insight that walking with God along the inherently sad journey of life, as fractured and inadequate humans, vigorously sorts the authentic values from the trivial ones and fills us with the real strength that comes from getting in touch with the true meaning of life as pilgrimage. "My grace is sufficient. My power is manifest in your weakness!"

My artist friend built a lovely house – an art object, but the northeast corner is rotting away. Life is like that and there is no curing it. "My grace is sufficient for you. My power will be made perfect through your weakness." Moreover, in the end, "in my father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare for you a place that I may take you to myself." This is surely the note that Paul picks up in I Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." God holds out the promise in our perplexity and in our labor that we live this life in one sense at least as though it were the vestibule of our eternal home.

> God has not promised skies always blue;
> Flowers strewn pathways all our life through,
> But God has promised strength for the day,
> Rest for the weary, light on the way.

If Paul had not had "the thorn in the flesh," he might have become a famous towering figure of history who created the new religion of Christianity. Then we would have worshipped him for 20 centuries. His fame would have eclipsed Christ's. God knew better. Paul's strength was in his weakness. God's strength in Paul that created this mainstream of grace to you and me came because Paul could not get in the way of it with heroic theologizing. God chose Paul as the great servant of his grace because Paul's affliction provided the matrix for God's power in his life. "My grace, my companionship in this pilgrimage, is operationally adequate to get you through," God was saying to St. Paul. So also God says to you and me and to all the Brits in London.

I got a lovely birthday card this week. It says, "Whenever God's hand touches our lives, it leaves fingerprints of love." I believe that stuff.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON FIVE

GOD'S HUMOR:
HOSEA 1-3 (SELECTIONS)

Where it was said, "You are not my people," it will be said
"Children of the Living God!"

"The Lord said to Hosea, "'Go take for yourself a wife who is a whore; and have children of her whoredom, for the land of my people commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.' So he went and took Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. She conceived and bore a son and the Lord said to him, 'Name that son Jezreel for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel and on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.' … She returned again in her whoredom and bore a daughter and the Lord said to Hosea, 'Name her Lo-Ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. I will have pity on the house of Judah and I will save them as the Lord their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen.' …When she weaned Lo-Ruhamah she conceived and bore a second son and the Lord said 'Name him Lo-Ammi which means You don't belong to me, for you are not my people and I am not your God ...Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered. … And in the place where it was said to them 'You are not my people" it shall be said of them, "you are the children of the living God'. The Lord said to Hosea again, 'Go love that woman who is a whore and has a lover and is an adulteress. Just like God loves God's people, though they turn to other Gods and they love raisin cakes.'"

My text is "The Lord loves His people, but the people prefer raisins." My theme is *God's Humor*. Some of you know already that I was raised with a people of long faces, the Dutch and German immigrants of the Christian Reformed Church. However, there were two people in that community who were not persons of the long face. Thank God, that was my mother and father. My mother had such an irrepressible sense of humor that all the long faces around her could not possibly put it down. I

think it was not accidental in the wisdom of God that my mother's name was Grace, the word that has become the central motif in all of my life and ministry. If it were not for Grace I would not be here. If it were not for grace I would not have made it this far.

God is not a joker but God has a surprising sense of humor. The Bible lets us in on that in many different places. People with long faces read the Bible with such seriousness that they usually miss the incredible sparkle of God's humor almost everywhere in it. It is important for us to notice God's surprisingly remarkable humor because if we miss that we cannot really get in touch with the depth and radical nature of God's unconditional grace. Or, to put it differently, if we do not notice God's humor we will miss those things that God is really serious about. We will also fail to notice those things that *we* are often too serious about but that are really hilarious to God.

A proper sense of God and a proper sense of our selves requires an appreciation of God's remarkable humor in our daily experience and in the consolations of the gospel of grace. In fact, I want to make the claim this morning that God's humor is constituent to the structure of things. You cannot really understand anything of God and God's world unless you understand that underneath it and through it runs this wonderful strain of divine humor. Think for example about the fact that the worst thing that ever happened in history turned out to be the best thing that ever happened in history: the crucifixion of Christ! God is a God of the great reversals and there's a humorful twist in every one of them.

The worst thing that ever happened in history, of course, was that a bunch of people 2,000 years ago crucified the unique Son of God. They tacked him up on a Roman cross, splashed his blood around so much that we can not forget him to this day. If they had not made such a gory, gruesome thing of it we would have forgotten it long ago. If we had forgotten this unusual and ancient Jewish story, we would have missed the point of creation, history, and salvation. What a twist! What a joke on every kind of evil on the face of the earth: your evil, mine, and everybody else's. God entered into the center of that awful historical accident of a bunch of ordinary nasty people doing what they thought was their job, killing Jesus. They hung him up on a cross and God turned him into a symbol of radical divine intervention, love, and redemption in the middle and focal point of history.

For the rest of history we will never be able to erase the bloodstains that save us by graphically confronting us with the truth about ourselves and God. What a turn of events that God should change death – Jesus' death – into life, our true life. In so doing God also changed your death

and my death. That God should have effected this fundamental, phenomenal, and ultimate reversal of things is a great trick on evil in the world. Death gives life. Loss gives gain. We grow only from our pain. Pain drives us into ourselves, into our inner spiritual resources, and produces the growth that really makes a difference in forming our lives and persons. It seems like a natural law built into the structure of things. Our pain brings our relief of faith.

God's unconditional grace in all of that is obviously constituent to God's very nature. It is characterological. Grace is not just something that God does to us or for us or in us. Grace is what God *is* to and for us. It is God's nature and character. God can not help God's self but be full of grace to us all. It's what God is made of. There is no other possibility but unconditional forgiving grace and that's the ultimate humor in the face of the gruesome humorlessness of our world. That awesome humor is all around us all the time.

Have you ever asked yourself the question, for example, for whose eyes it is that the sun sets in glorious splendor on millions and millions of planets all through the millions of universes every day? For whose eyes is all that incredible beauty? God is profligate in generosity and in the way God splashes beauty everywhere without any real consideration of efficiency. It makes you laugh for joy to think of God's playfulness. God must laugh every day thinking of the way in which God has cast it all out there to splash around wherever it will and in the process touch our hearts and minds. We have all sat and watched the vast kaleidoscope of changes in a cloudy sunset or a dramatic sunrise. We all have learned that the more billowy the clouds, the better the sunset or the more spectacular the sunrise! The more clouds in life the more they make the spectacular showers of God's beauty shimmer everywhere. That is humorous.

My wife, Mary Jo, was born and raised in Shiprock, New Mexico. When I was a young buck working my way through college I decided one summer that I would take three weeks off from my job in highway construction and visit her. I hitchhiked to New Mexico. As I came up 93 from Gallup I saw over to the left, out in the middle of the desert, what looked for all the world like a sailing ship. I thought "What a joke! Is this a mirage? Or is this some kind of divine spectacle?" Here is this grand sailing ship serenely coasting over the sea of the desert. Well, by now you have guessed it was Shiprock Mountain. It looks like a big ship sailing across the desert and I guess that is why it is called Shiprock Mountain. What a funny thing for God to do, however God managed to do that.

Or think of a moment in history. Napoleon had thrown his armies across all of Europe and to the boundaries of Asia. He had sent them

victoriously across the Mediterranean into Africa, and taken most of the Middle East. The British were constantly contesting him but not very successfully until one day at Waterloo. The rather small and under-equipped British force aligned itself for battle against the massive mobile French armies. It was clear that the next morning would be the fatal day of battle and would tell the time on the growing British and French empires.

The French had heavy artillery and lots of cavalry. There really was not a very good prospect for the British, except for the fact that Waterloo happens to lie in a rich agricultural valley where the land is thick with a heavy clay loam. Napoleon had his heavy infantry arrayed against the British light infantry, with his artillery readied to move into place as the infantry advanced. His heavy cavalry he held in reserve. At 3:00 in the afternoon the day before the battle a light rain began to fall and it drizzled all afternoon and all night. In the morning it turned into a steady rain.

As the battle began Napoleon could not advance his infantry through the slippery footing nor get his artillery up on line. The mud was soon knee-deep to the horses and delayed the heavy cavalry. The British light infantry attacked, picking off the French units piecemeal, and won the day. What a joke! What a wonderful divine humor that Napoleon, the great imperialist who had flung armies across the entire then-known Western world, should be defeated at Waterloo by a gentle rain, saving democracy for the Western World.

It reminds you of that wonderful film entitled "Oh, God" in which George Burns starred. Burns, as God, comments upon his experiments with creating animals and finds it very funny that the camel was really intended to be a horse, but unfortunately it got designed by a church committee. Or the giraffe, which has a wonderful set of vocal chords, but its neck is so long that the sound never gets to its mouth. It is a completely silent animal. Funny, mystifying, like the funny, mystifying mutuality in all of life between the tragic and the hilarious. Did you ever notice that?

Peter De Vries wrote a lot of funny novels. You may know of them: *Tunnel of Love*, *Comfort me with Apples*, *Mackeral Plaza*, *Slouching towards Kalamazoo*, and so forth. Time magazine said that he was the funniest writer on either side of the Atlantic. I heard him give a lecture at Calvin College. He was a graduate of that college as am I. He was thought to have become an atheist. In his lecture on humor he said it was not quite an accurate story that he had become an atheist. He said the central point was that he had fled religion to spirituality, which every one of us should do. Then if we want to come back from spirituality to a revivified

religion, fine. But everybody should flee religion for spirituality to find his or her real inner connection with God.

He said that humor and tragedy need each other. They can never exist apart from each other. Humor is the "by the skin of your teeth escape" from the ultimate consequences of real tragedy. That is what makes things really funny, he suggested. Humor is the redemptive perspective on the universal strain of the grievous in everything in life. It is reflected in the funny, mystifying mutuality of the majestic in God's world, and the malignant in God's world. For example in our day and age there is nothing so hopeful and so horrible as nuclear power. So people are afraid to touch it though it is the cleanest source of unlimited energy. That is funny when it comes right down to it.

Peter De Vries said humor and tragedy are neighbors. They meet at the same well: the human tear duct. Humor is the unexpected turn away from tragedy, pain, and suffering just when you feel that all is lost. For example you remember the old joke about Pat and Mike visiting the Empire State Building. On the 76th floor Pat needs to go to the men's room, so he pries open a door and steps in. There is a long wooosh and a thud. He had stepped into the elevator shaft. Mike is absolutely sure he has lost his dear friend. Then up the shaft comes this plaintiff call: " Mike, watch out for that first step!"

The reason you and I laugh about that is that it is the ultimate tragedy but he gets clean away. That's why it's so funny. Once when I had the flu, my wife sent my five year old daughter to the pharmacist next door to get a thermometer. The little girl said "bumometer". He thought she said "barometer." When my wife took it out of my mouth it read, "dry and windy."

The Bible starts right off with hilarity. The first chapter says that God created this wonderful world. The second chapter reinforces that and then the third chapter says that everything went to hell in a hand basket. Adam and Eve fell into sin. Do you remember what happens next? In the face of the ultimate tragedy of the fall, God comes into the Garden of Eden. God walks right in like the owner of the place. Then the all-powerful, all-knowing, omnipresent God of the universe starts looking around the bushes, under the stones, and behind the trees to find Adam, as though God does not know where he was. He calls out "Adam! Adam! Where are you?" *Adam* is the one who does not know where he is but God acts like *God* does not know where Adam is. That has got to be absolutely hilarious to anyone who thinks about it enough to notice. God is hilarious and playful!

Finally God finds Adam. He sees that Adam has sewn some leaves

together to cover his genitals and God said, “What in the world are you doing now?” Adam said, “Well, I knew I was naked.” God said, “Who told you?” I mean if you are standing naked in your living room and the water meter reader marches into your house, does anybody have to tell you that you are naked? Why is that verse crafted that way? It is because God is trying to give the whole tragic situation a bit of a light touch. Yes, everything has gone to hell in a hand basket, but since God is a God of grace and mercy nothing much is lost.

God, in effect, declares, “Well, we will start where you are Adam and Eve and we will go for the same objective we always had: our fellowship together.” God is playing with and poking fun of the moment. We think we have had the “power” to muck everything up and God is saying, “Look, it is not that easy to muck up my world. It’s not that easy to break my equation. My equation is grace and forgiveness. Where are you, Adam, Susie, or Joe? Why are you so stressed about messing up your life? Who told you that you are naked? Let’s sit down together and go from here – together."

Really! You know how the story goes on. Have you not thought of how humorful it is that in the Bible we have the Song of Solomon right after the book of Ecclesiastes? In Ecclesiastes Solomon, in his midlife depression, is complaining that all is vanity and vexation of spirit and everything he looks at depresses him. It is a book of profound philosophical French existentialism and all that German 19th century nihilism. So what do we have next, in God’s book? The play and foreplay of the Song of Solomon! Ever think about that? That is one hilarious book about making love? It's a wonderful thing, a wonderful sense of humorful proportion in God, and for those who really catch on to God’s nature and spirit!

Now, if that does not get you, read the book of Jonah. There is a really interesting guy. Jonah is the ultimate Israeli. He is sure that the only people on the face of the earth who have any claim on anything are the Israeli. When God says to him, "Jonah, I want you to go up there to Nineveh in Syria and I want you to save Nineveh (modern Iraq). Go proclaim my grace and love to Nineveh." Jonah said under his breath, “Well that is the last thing I am going to do. If I go up there and strengthen Nineveh what is going to happen to Israel? They are going to wipe us off the face of the earth. They are going to push us into the Mediterranean Sea – do you not understand that, God?" So Jonah got on a ship and headed for Spain (read the USA). Jonah was sure that God’s domain was limited to Israel. He thought that if he just got out to sea, beyond the twelve –mile limit, that would be outside God’s domain.

So he headed for Tarsus in Spain and then the funny stuff in that mythic story really starts to happen. First God caused the sea to practically vomit out that ship. As a result Jonah gets seasick and so does everybody else and you can imagine them vomiting all over the ship. Then Jonah sees why this is going on and he says the solution is for the crew to vomit him out of the ship; throw him overboard. So they do that and what happens? He lands in the belly of a big fish that vomits him out on dry land. I mean, if you read it with a little imagination there is a lot of vomiting going on in the book of Jonah.

That is the set-up, however. Not the story. All that vomiting got Jonah's attention and he decided that he had just better get his act together and head for Nineveh (Iraq). He decides to do what God says. He goes to preach to the Ninevites. However he does not want to save the Ninevites, so instead of preaching God's grace to Nineveh he gave them hellfire and damnation. He did not even mention God's grace. He just announced that in forty days Nineveh was going to be destroyed. That is, "We are coming up here with deep implosion bombs and we are going to penetrate your nuclear systems and take out your city. This place is going to be plowed under." No grace, no gospel, just a political announcement! "In forty days you guys are toast." Well, all that hellfire and damnation, completely lacking in any sense of grace, became the instrument of God's *grace*.

God is the God of great reversals. The twist of the humor is that all that hellfire and brimstone redeemed the Ninevites. They all say, "Hey this could get serious. Maybe we should take God seriously." So they all repent, from the king on his throne right on down to all the pet dogs and cats. All the humans and animals repent. Jonah sat on a hill waiting for the next shoe to drop, confident that God would blast those people and that all their repentance was not really going to cut it. After all, "God is in favor of Israel and the Israelites. We have the special mortgage on God." So Jonah was waiting for God to come. He was sitting in the refreshing shade of a nice vine that just grew up overnight. Then God saved the repentant city. Jonah was angry. Then God came and the vine died and Jonah was even more angry again.

So God said, "Do you have a right to be so angry?" And Jonah said, "Yes, I have a right to be angry enough to die." Sounds about like a three-year-old! God said, "Well, here I am. What are you so upset about?" Jonah says "I am upset about the fact that you have saved Nineveh. I knew that you would do that, you dirty forgiver!! And that's why I went away to Tarsus in Spain. Besides, you killed my vine!"

God said, "Jonah, this plant you are so in love with grew up overnight. It gave you shade for a day and over night it died. You are in love with

this ephemeral plant. You are really angry and sad and claim this plant is a tremendous loss. Can you not figure out that I love this great city of Nineveh which I have built? In this city are 250,000 children and a lot of cows. I like cows, Jonah. I'd save the city just for the cows." God likes cows. That's the hilarious last line of the book. "I'm not going to destroy Nineveh, Jonah. Look at all those nice fat cows."

Well, we could go on. Jesus' story of the blind man is one of the funniest in the world you know. Jesus cured him. The Pharisees can not figure out how this is possible because he did it on the Sabbath and, therefore, he must not be from God. The blind man says, "This is very funny. You are the theologians, you are the great wise people of Israel and you can not figure this out. For me it is very simple. I was blind, now I see. Whoever did that must come from God."

The narrative story of the entire Bible can be boiled down to one clean string of divine humor. Throughout God makes it plain that God has not chosen to cherish God's people because we are great, wise, upright, admirable, faithful, dependable, loving, attractive, or profitable to God. God has chosen to cherish humans because our human limitations and our failures – indeed, our iniquity, makes us a remarkably graphic illustration of God's unconditional grace. When we reflect upon it, we are God's best revelation to ourselves of God's grace. In spite of our selves we are all safe in God's grace. That should make us all laugh with humor and joy. God told Hosea to keep going back to that whore and keep making love to her until she learned real love from him. It finally worked. That is hilarious! God wanted to nail down once and for all the radical nature of God's love for us. God nailed it down in our very humorful text. "I love all people, but the people prefer raisins."

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON SIX

HONEST TO GOD:
JOHN 8:28-33 (32)

You will understand the truth and it will give you freedom

When I was a senior army officer, with numerous subordinates responsible to me and even more senior officers to whom I was accountable, I remember often hearing and saying, "There is your way and my way and the army's way of doing this. Guess which way it is going to be done." In most cases it is true that any given course of action may be carried out in a variety of ways. Most of us conclude from that fact that the right thing is usually not one thing but a great variety of possible right things.

Similarly, most people today believe that truth is not one clear and definable fact or one identifiable way of understanding a thing, a situation, or an idea. Most people think that truth is a variety of possible ways of looking at any given matter. Aristotle thought that there is a great difference between objective truth and popular opinion. He said in his book on ethics (*Nichomacheaen Ethics*, 240 BC), "The high minded person must care more for the truth than for what people think." It would be hard to disagree.

My wife is absolutely sure that truth is not absolute or objective. She is certain that there is such a thing as her truth, which is always remarkably different from my truth. I keep telling her that what she calls her truth is really only her perception and that truth stands on its own two feet, out there in the wind and the rain, quite apart from what we may think it is. I tell her that it is our job to make certain that our perceptions are as close to that objective truth as possible. When I say that to her, I am always secretly aware of the fact that I think my truth is closer to the Truth than hers is. Truth stands on its own merit, outside of our minds and even outside of God's mind, if we are to take seriously Proverbs 8-9 and Job 28. In those chapters, truth engages in the task of tutoring God on how to create the universe.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the toweringly famous preacher at the Riverside Cathedral Church in New York for many decades, declared

regarding the objectivity of truth and of our quest for it, "One of the supreme hours of human experience arrives when a person gets his or her eye on something concerning which he or she is persuaded that it is the eternal truth" (*A Great Time to Be Alive,* 1944).

Well, fifty eight years of such rather vigorous conversation with Mary Jo has not made a dint in her concept of truth, but I confess that her line of argument has made a dint upon my concept of the truth – indeed, illumined it somewhat. I have come to realize that each of us is only able to possess the truth to the extent that we can gather knowledge about it, understand that data, and integrate it into our way of thinking about things, divine or human. That is, that scope of the truth that each of us possesses at any given time is limited and we may differ from all others in our perspective on it. Nonetheless, it is the perception of the truth that we possess at any given time that is the truth upon which we are called by God and our own integrity to operate. So that is *the truth* for us at that moment, our personal truth, as Mary Jo insists.

She has good authority to back her claim. A thoughtful American philosopher named Bede Jarrett declared in 1915, in his book, *Meditations for Living Fully*, "The Truth may be one, final, and determined; but my apprehension of it can never be anything of the kind; it is changing continuously." He was very much in line with St. Augustine's notion 1550 years earlier, "Turn not to the outside world! Into your own self go back! In the inner person resides Truth!" (*On True Religion*, 390 CE).

I take it, therefore, that when Jesus declared that if we know the truth the truth will set us free he was looking at the issue of the truth from both sides. On the one hand, it is clear from the context that he was encouraging us to quest for an understanding of the truth of God which comes from the mind of God and holds its own, as truth, regardless of what our opinions or perceptions of it might be. In fact, the specific truth of which Jesus was speaking in John 8:32 was the truth that he was the Son of Man, namely, the messenger from heaven who came to reveal the mysteries of God to us. Those mysteries, according to Paul, are epitomized in the fact that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto God's self."

On the other hand, it is clear that when Jesus said this truth would make us free he was speaking of something happening inside of us as we comprehend these truths of God. That is, Jesus was urging us to be authentic persons of inner integrity about the truth in so far as we understand it. We must hold that much of the truth as we understand, as though it is God's *whole truth* for us, and be absolutely open and honest with ourselves about believing, speaking, and living in keeping with *that truth* that we perceive. Honest to ourselves and, therefore, honest to God.

In 1963 Bishop J. A. T. Robinson wrote a book entitled, *Honest to God*, in which he argued that since we can only speak of God in metaphors we must make sure that we are not slavishly devoting ourselves to the metaphors and language of past Christian tradition, just because it is the tradition of our doctrine, theology, or church dogma. Language flavors and meanings change over time and so we cannot be sure that what we mean by the creeds is what the authors of the creeds or of our theology really meant. We cannot reenter their moment and its atmosphere to perceive again what precise meaning freight of thought and feeling their words carried for them. We may read with great profit the grand words of Thomas Aquinas, for example, and greatly admire his wonderfully surprising framework of thought, fashioned like a cathedral of ideas, but we cannot reenter his mind and spirit and be sure we are discerning the precise thought and feeling he was conceiving.

We must ask ourselves what the truth of our faith means for us operationally. The God described by the past is dead. The God of the gaps in our knowledge, the God of threat, the God of magical religion is dead. God must come alive for us in our faith experience in the present in terms of *our best understanding* of the historic reports on the faith tradition. This acquisition of the truth for our own way of understanding God, ourselves, and our world can only come by the illumination and leading of the Divine Spirit in our personal spiritual experiences as we try to understand the historic quest for God. To make this happen we must be open to and trust the intimations of the spirit of God to our spirits personally.

We must take the position which Peter took at the Sea of Galilee when Jesus asked him three times if Jesus could count on his love. Peter realized Jesus was pressing him three times, just as he had betrayed Jesus three times, when Jesus was on trial, in Caiaphas' house. Jesus asked him, "Can I count on you being willing to invest your life in the truth you have learned about me?" Peter responded in effect, "Lord, you know me better than I know myself. You heard me betray you. Obviously, I am a limited and flawed human being with a limited and flawed comprehension of the truth about myself, to say nothing about the mysteries regarding you and God. You must take me as I am. I am a mere man who must operate with only that truth that I have acquired and that I can learn from careful thought and from the school of hard knocks in life. But I am *for* what you are *for* in so far as I can understand it." Jesus then ordained him on the spot!

I once asked my Princeton Professor, Otto Piper, how we can be sure that what we understand is really God's truth. His response was astonishing

to me at the time. He said, "Well, when you notice that your own personal spiritual experience rings true to the witness of the scripture and to the testimony of the historic church concerning its faith experience you are probably on fairly solid ground." That is the key. "The key to the world is given into our hands, when we throw ourselves unreservedly into the service of the highest truth we know" (G. S. Merriam, *The Chief End of Man*, 1897). You might be surprised by my quoting in this context from the Qur'an, "The truth is from your Lord. Let him who will, believe it! Let him who will, reject it!" (*Qur'an*, Surah 18:29). Throwing oneself into the service of the highest truth we can comprehend affords faith that enhances life and character, and every one of us can testify to the fact that it works that way. Fundamentalisms with their obsessive preoccupation with ideologies for their own sake, apart from real inner experience of the healing and freeing power of God's truth, always wreck life and character.

So we are simply not permitted, if we pursue the truth, to confuse truth with tradition, theology, dogma, ideology, doctrine, revelation, or even the Bible. It may be the case that they express truth, if properly understood. However, they do not tell the truth because they are doctrine or ideology or revelation. They tell the truth when they cause something to happen inside of us. It can happen to us individually and as the community of believers. It becomes the truth for us as it makes our inner experience of God fill our lives with consolation, peace, assurance, and hope. It usually includes a view of God and God's world arising in our inner selves, affording us the wholesome sense of trust in God's grace. That is faith.

There are many ways to know the truth about God and about ourselves and our world. We can know such truth by experience, by rational thought, ESP, prescience, intuition, and the testimony of others. Cardinal Newman (*Grammar of Assent* IX, 1870) thought that there is no ultimate test of truth besides the testimony borne to truth by the mind and spirit of each of us as we sense its authenticity. That sounds like a very subjective approach to our quest for God's truth. Subjectivism can be narcissistic, self-centered, and dangerous.

Karl Barth, the greatest Reformed Theologian of the 20th century, was so afraid of the subjectivism he found in the work of Schleiermacher, probably the greatest theologian of the 19th century, that Barth completely condemned Schleiermacher's work. He thought Schleiermacher's theology was subjectivistic because he emphasized so strongly the individual Christian's perception of the intimations of the Divine Spirit in us. He encouraged a personalized realization of God's presence to us in life. Barth effectively suppressed the influence of this very important theologian and pastor for a century. In the end Barth had to apologize and

reckon with the fact that Schleiermacher's highly personalized sense of spirituality and of the ministry of God as Spirit to our spirits was probably one of the most spiritually insightful perspectives since Jesus himself. Barth had written twelve huge volumes of theology from an objective Christological perspective. After he retired he said that if he had it to do over again he would have followed Schleiermacher and written the entire scope of theology from the perspective of the intimations of the Holy Spirit.

That emphasis upon God speaking by his spirit directly to the spirit of each individual person is dangerous, of course. People like Adolph Hitler and the Muslim terrorists really believe, when they kill innocent people for their cause, that they know and are obeying the truth God has given to them. It is plain to see that their perception is evil. They do not get their truth from the Divine Spirit or from the spirit of the good and healing nature of godliness. That is why the Bible requires us to discern the spirits to see if they are of God. That is, it is important to discern whether they enhance our lives, character, and healing relationships or degrade them. If the truth operates redemptively it certifies itself. If the results are counterproductive it may be our truth but it is not of the Spirit. The Bible implies that we can figure out the difference if we strive for truth and authenticity.

At best in life we have limited data but we must take the time and diligent learning process to do the best we can with what we have. We must not worry about the fact that our sense of the truth even about God is always narrowed to our private perspective. It is always constrained by our limited capacity to grasp God's truth for us. Nonetheless, Jesus assured us that our own limited truth will set us free because he knows that being true to ourselves at every stage in our quest for the truth is a way of being honest to God. To be honest to God is completely freeing. It frees us from fear, guilt, shame, ignorance, confusion, and perplexity. It affords us that sense of freedom which brings spiritual consolation, peace, and tranquility. It gives us a life of trust and assurance in pursuing our quest of growth in truth and goodness.

When that sense of open, honest freedom is also illumined by the Divine Spirit with the insights of God's unconditional, universal, and radical grace, we are free indeed. We can *trust our own insights*, *our own spiritual quest*, *our own sense of honest inner congruency*. We can *trust our personal truth quest*. Even a mustard seed's worth of true faith in God's grace is saving faith. The OT prophet encouraged us to trust that God meant it when he said, "If with all your heart you truly seek me, you

shall ever surely find me!" That must be what Jesus wanted us to hear in his words, "God's spirit will lead you into all the truth" (Jn 14).

Francis Bacon (Essays, 1597) thought that "the sovereign good of human nature involves five things: first the inquiry after truth, second the love for and wooing of the knowledge of the truth, third the experience of the presence of truth, fourth belief in the truth, fifth the enjoyment and celebration of the truth.

So in your quest, if the tradition, creeds, historic theology, or even the Bible just do not make sense to you, do not believe them or claim that you do. Be honest to God and yourself. Honest error is better than *dishonest reasons* for holding to what might even turn out to be the truth but has not yet seemed persuasive for you. If it does not yet ring true for you, wait on the spirit. Seek the leading of the Spirit. *Throw yourself unreservedly into the service of the highest truth you know*. Open yourself to the Spirit. If you adhere to a formulation of the truth just because it is our faith tradition you have substituted ideology for truth. William James said that is second hand religion. That is not honest to God. Reinhold Niebuhr declared in *Human Destiny* (1943), "It is neither possible for man to know the truth fully, nor to avoid the error of pretending that he does."

Let us not pretend. Let us wait on the Lord to lead and illumine us. We can be believers who are open to the light and truth from the Divine Spirit. If with all our hearts we truly seek God, we shall ever surely find God. We shall know our truth and that truth will set us free!

Amen. So let it Be!

Sermon Seven

Love One Another:
John 15:9-17

"Love one another … greater love has no one
than to lay down his life for a friend."

Throughout my ministry I have been very much interested in the psychological as well as the spiritual side of human nature and growth. It is my heartfelt conviction that those two not only fit together but that they are the same. Those two terms, psychology and spirituality, inquire into the same domain of function inside us. They are interchangeable terms, each simply getting at the facts about our inner life from a slightly different angle. Each, therefore, has a different perspective and its own special language for its investigating human beings. However, the subject of study is the same: The Living Human Document – a person.

Spirituality is a word we give to that quest for understanding ourselves in relationship with God that has to do with, or comes at us from, the direction of our hunger for meaning. Psychology is our term for that same inner self and its functions when we come at it from the side of analyzing the processes by which our personalities grow and we act out our lives. Thus, psychology and spirituality cannot be separated either in concept, terminology, or operational experience.

Having set that forth, I want to tell you a story. You may be familiar with the research study on how mammals thrive. That study had to do with a group of new-born monkeys. They were divided into three categories. One group of monkeys was put into individual cages which were empty and barren. The monkeys were fed through a slot, could not see their caretakers, and were given no contact with any other animal or human.

The second category was put into individual cages, in which there was a transitional love object in the form of a terrycloth covered pole, on which to climb and play. These monkeys also saw their human caretakers when they were fed or tended. However, they were never touched or coddled. The third category of simians was placed in individual cages in which there were toys, the terrycloth pole, and pleasant surroundings. They were

played with by the caretakers, coddled, held, caressed, loved, and touched a great deal.

You can guess what happened over the twelve weeks of the experiment. The first category of monkeys did not thrive. They became dysfunctional physically and psychologically. They soon withered and would have died had they not been rescued and nurtured back to health. The second category did better than the first, having had the terrycloth pole, a warm substitute for loving care, which they turned into a transitional love object. However, they did not thrive normally, lacking touching tenderness. The third category thrived robustly and developed in good health and happiness. Without love the monkeys would die. With love, regardless of the other circumstances in their lives, they could thrive. Love heals. That is obviously why the Bible enjoins us to love one another!

A nurse friend of my wife reported her story of twins born prematurely and placed in separate incubators. As is usual in such cases, one twin was stronger than the other and did better from the start. The nurse noticed when the twins were about ten or eleven days old that the weaker one was losing ground rapidly. She thought, in fact, that the child might not make it through the night. Her intuition prompted her to put that twin into the incubator with her stronger sister. Over the next few hours the stronger twin managed to get her arm around the shoulders of the weaker one, holding her tenderly, as it were. From that moment the weaker twin began to thrive, and ultimately made it. When Jesus said, “Love one another,” he knew what he was talking about.” Love heals. Love one another!

In these two situations love healed the object of the love. But it is not only true for the object of love in situations in which you give love. It is also true in you that love heals you when you give it to another. The child that put her arm around her sibling created a healing situation. Robust, healthy, and normal children usually fix upon an object to which they can give lots of love when they are in infancy. They come to cherish a favorite blanket or teddy bear or doll, some such transitional love object, into which they pour their affection and tenderness.

I was completely unaware of it at the time, but I understand that my oldest brother, the most masculine and self-assured guy you can imagine, had a doll until he was six years old. I never had a doll. I do not remember what I had, but children profit from giving love to a transitional love object. It helps us make our transition from attachment to mother. It empowers us to move on to embrace the big unknown world into which we are forging our precarious and scary way as children.

When Jesus said, "Love one another," he meant to say that in our giving cherishing care to each other we ourselves are healed. That is, a person or community that cultivates consciously and intentionally the culture of love and care – the culture of the Divine Spirit – inevitably is infinitely healthier spiritually..

You remember the story about the elderly man in a country church who had given his life and talent generously to the congregation through all the strong years of his life. He loved God and the community of faith. However, when he became advanced in years he slowly found himself on the sidelines as young leadership began to do the work of the church. Consequently, some new ideas were floated and some new things were decided upon, some new directions pursued, some of which he thought ill advised. When he spoke up and his words were not given the weight and authority they used to have and his objections were not influential in the ongoing life of the church he felt rejected. Rejection turned to grief, grief to paranoia, paranoia to anger, anger to self pity, and self pity turned to alienation. The old man stopped coming to church. Whenever anyone called on him he would not talk about it. His resentment became more and more self-infecting and withered him away spiritually.

In a final desperate attempt to re-engage him the pastor took an entire evening to visit the old man. They sat by the fire. After talking about the weather for three or four sentences the old man fell silent. The pastor stayed. They sat in silence. The fire roared warmly and in the center of the fire was a very large red hot coal. It obviously fueled the fire with the vigor of its heat. After an hour or so the pastor got up, took the poker, moved that large glowing coal from the center of the fire, and pushed it out to the periphery. After another hour, off in the corner by itself that hot coal was cold and dead. The pastor got up and went home. Thereafter the old man was back in church and in the loving fellowship of the community of faith.

Isolated, alone, alienated we cannot be the spiritual people we are called to be. Jesus said, therefore, "Love one another." Greater love than this no one has than that he or she should sacrifice his or her self, in one way or another, for another person in material, social, psychological, and spiritual need.

I had a great friend, The Reverend Dr. Harry Boer. He spent his life in Africa as a teaching missionary at the African Bible College in Nigeria. Before he was a missionary he was a chaplain to the United States Marines. He was with the marines all the way through the Pacific Campaign. He told me a story of when they assaulted the island of Tinian. It was a particularly bloody landing and subsequent battle. The Japanese

were dug in, hiding in caves, with well prepared gun emplacements. Their interlocking fields of fire made the advance of our marines a particularly deadly battle.

This story begins when the marines had established a good beachhead, had brought in a great amount of supplies and ammunition, and had begun the conquest of the island. Chaplain Boer's battalion held the point of the advance for the regiment and became pinned down by a series of carefully coordinated machinegun nests in the ridge above their position. As the captain sent men forward to take out those lethal nests each marine was slaughtered as soon as he ran into open territory between the lines. Finally, a young soldier from Chaplain Boer's fellowship group of staunch believers was ordered to attempt an end run around the lethal emplacements.

The young soldier, personally known to Chaplain Boer as a warm hearted fellow, stood up and prepared to make the run. Reciting the scripture "Whether I live I live unto the Lord, and whether I die I die unto the Lord. Whether I live, therefore, or die, I am the Lord's," he ran forward and managed to get two grenades into the key machinegun nest and turn his flamethrower upon it. Though he was mortally wounded, hit 27 times, he opened the way for his company and battalion to advance. "Greater love no man has than that he lay down his life for his friends."

I take Jesus' words as a mandate to each of us personally and to the church. "Love one another." I have said a lot about what that means individually. What does that mean for the church institutionally? First, it means developing leadership of *consensus* and not of *coercion*. It is up to members to make that happen. It is imperative that everything is shepherded in the direction of leadership by consensus. Most congregations have adequate internal strength and constructive relationship. Developing a substantial experience of cooperative work toward specific valuable directions for specific valuable objectives is crucial for mobilizing that strength.

It is important that any negative undercurrents that exist in a faith community must be addressed and removed. In every community of people there are, of course, contrarian views. That can be wholesome and helpful unless it becomes a kind of mindless guerrilla war. I have noticed that young pastors will not put up with churches with a guerilla war going on. They will not stay. They go elsewhere and leave the church to its sick dynamics. It takes an old head like mine and an old heart like mine that has been through the wars with sick and petty people, to take that kind of stuff for a long time and to continue to work it out. If a church wants a pastor for the long run it makes sure that those kinds of counter-productive

influences are evaporated out of the life of the congregation. If a congregation cannot outgrow its negatives it sometimes requires surgery.

Some people think that being contrarian is humorful, or heroic, or interesting. They may even think that such guerilla warfare is somehow their responsibility. They get a lot of ego-feeding mileage out of continuing to criticize, always having a "better idea," constantly keeping the flow of ministry off-stride. Well, in one sense *it is humorful*. It is humorful because it is so adolescent for adults to act that way. It is childish and unconstructive! When adults intentionally act like adolescents or children it is asinine. How can mature and responsible people respond to it but to laugh at how ridiculous those adults make themselves appear! It is ironically laughable.

So every authentic pastor wishes to encourage congregations to find their way into strategies of workable harmony. There is no better way to do that than to work on figuring out what it means operationally to "Love one another." Negativity erodes the culture of the Divine Spirit. If we walk the walk as well as talk the talk we can count on God as Spirit to empower our love for one another and both the giver and receiver of love will heal and prosper. Sometimes laying down my life for you means giving ground on my idea to make room for yours.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON EIGHT

THE CHEMISTRY OF FORGIVENESS: JOHN 20:19-23

If you forgive anyone's sin, he or she is forgiven.
If you do not forgive someone's sins, he or she remains unforgiven.

Forgiveness is worth dying for. Jesus' life illustrates that fact. Forgiveness is also worth living for. Jesus' life epitomizes that truth. That is what Good Friday and Easter are essentially about – the deep truths about forgiveness. Forgiveness is worth putting one's life on the line for. Jesus clearly intended to incarnate the prophets' struggle against the old ethic of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. At the cross that prophetic vision was nailed down as the center of all of God's operations in this world. It was the message that forgiveness is worth dying for and worth living for. Can you imagine how things in this world would change if Jesus' message could be insinuated into the minds and hearts of the conflicts in our personal lives and in our world affairs today? What a radical change would take place!

Simon Wiesenthal was a Jew who lived in Vienna. After WW II he tracked down and exterminated Nazis, the criminal politicians who were popular in the European world during the time of Adolf Hitler. Wiesenthal did not always sit comfortably with killing Germans. He told that story in his book, *The Sunflowers*. It is a small book that will change your life. In it he tells the story of being impressed into a work party by the Nazis. He was sent to a military hospital that received the more serious casualties from the battlefield. He was the leader of a maintenance group responsible for the yard and the exterior of the medical center.

One day he was called by a ward orderly to see a young man who wished to speak to a noted Jewish person. The young man was twenty two. He had been conscripted into the German army at age eighteen and assigned to the SS troops. The SS perpetrated the worst war crimes during the Hitler era. His unit was responsible for the extermination of a Jewish ghetto in Eastern Europe. Subsequently, an explosion had blinded and lethally wounded him. He was the son of a Lutheran pastor, but during his

military years he had replaced his faith tradition with Nazis ideology. Now he lay near death and wanted to confess to some significant Jewish person how he and his fellow soldiers had set fire to the Jewish tenements and had shot the women and children as they attempted to escape.

Wiesenthal went to see the young man and sat at his bedside for a couple of hours. The soldier poured out his heart. Wiesenthal said nothing except that he would return the next day. Again he sat for two hours while the patient implored him for forgiveness, having come back to the passions of his earlier religious life. Wiesenthal came back a third day and listened for while longer. By that point he was so thoroughly disgusted with the soldier's pleas that he got up and silently left. The blind lad did not hear him depart. Wiesenthal struggled to such an extent with his unforgiving act that he could not free himself from it.

Finally he wrote the story and sent it to a number of ethics philosophers and theologians in the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant communities. He asked them what he should have done. “Should I, could I, have forgiven that young man for those reprehensible things he did?” Many Jewish scholars wrote back and said, “You couldn’t forgive him. Nobody can forgive him except the people that he slaughtered.” Others said, “You can’t forgive him, only God can forgive him.” A famous Roman Catholic theologian, Jacques Maritain, said, “You should have forgiven him. He made his confession to you. You were God’s man on the spot. God forgives him. You should have forgiven him.”

The most impressive response, it seemed to me, came from Martin Marty, a Lutheran theologian at the University of Chicago. He said, “Simon, you should have forgiven him. God forgives him. He was making his confession to you and you were God’s agent there. You should have forgiven him. But there are other reasons you should have forgiven him. First of all, you are getting way too much mileage out of your guilt. Secondly, forgiveness frees the forgiver more than the forgiven.” Jesus understood clearly that the psychospiritual impact of the act of forgiving is indeed the channel and the agency of the Divine Spirit that changes a person's life. That is why in our text for today Jesus makes it so plain that our calling is nothing more and nothing less than the kind of unconditional forgiveness with which God handles us.

On 15 February 1993, *Time Magazine* had an interesting article called The Chemistry of Love. From it I have adapted my title this morning, The Chemistry of Forgiveness. That article significantly claimed that love is a matter of biochemistry. It said that most of us know the exciting feeling we experience when we suddenly seem to connect with another person in that exotic way we call falling in love. The article was based upon

extensive biochemical research. Special stimuli that our brains recognize are set off by some characteristic of another person. That cranks up our endocrine system to produce four chemicals that have the same effect as amphetamines.

That puts us into a state caused by the chemistry of love. "I have fallen in love! It is not just that I love him, I am *in love with him."* Four amphetamines! According to the article these seem to last about four months to four years and then our bodies run out of the capacity to keep on pumping them. The decline of those four produces a different kind of chemistry that incites feelings of devotion, enduring commitment, and sustained interest.

I am sure that there is some truth to that. I vow never to give up on the notion that there is something more than chemistry, something exotic and spiritual, about falling in love. I hope it lasts forever for you and me.

It is interesting that Jesus' entire approach to the matter of forgiveness was not just some theoretical interest. Jesus' approach was pragmatic and operational. If you forgive people their sins now, he said to his disciples, they will be forgiven for all eternity. If you do not forgive them now, they are locked into a kind of bondage until they are forgiven. Operational! Practical! I suspect that what Jesus understood to be behind that enjoinder was something like the science behind the article in *Time*. Forgiveness is for stepping over and transcending the kind of injury that cannot be rationalized away, cannot be understood, is completely unexplainable, and therefore can only be disposed of by forgiving it. Otherwise we are stuck with carrying it around in our hearts as a burden for the rest of our lives. Jesus understood that when we take the action of stepping over that injury by intentionally forgiving it, that act sets in motion a lot of dynamics inside of us that may actually affect our biochemistry. It shifts our sense of things, our mindset, and our attitudes toward the specific relationship. It initiates a healing of the forgiver first, and then the forgiven as well.

I run into people in my clinical work who are caught in their incapacity to forgive a serious relational injury. The net effect is that the person who did the injury probably does not even know about it. The person who has been injured is destined for life to carry that cancer in his or her soul because of the inability to forgive it. Forgiveness frees the forgiver psychospiritually, and maybe even psychobiologically. That was the brand new idea that was epitomized for the world at the cross of Jesus. It was simply *that* profound life-changing truth. Jesus prayed for those who were killing him, "Father forgive them. They do not know what they are doing."

Christian tradition is noted for its sophisticated theology and well thought out life and world view. That has at times pushed us into intellectualizing the gospel rather than internalizing it. Jesus would not have understood that kind of Christianity. When Peter, James, and John were on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus and they saw the vision in that story, Peter's response was, "Man, we ought to set up shop here. This was such an exotic event. Let us just remain here in this mountaintop experience."

Do you know what Jesus' response was to that escapist perception of spirituality? He grabbed all three of them and slammed their heads together and took them down the mountain and stuck them into the face of a demon-possessed child and said, "Get down to business." He took them off the mountaintop and grounded them in the mud and sand and slime of human suffering.

If you forgive people their sins they will be forgiven. You will set in motion in them a chemistry of the Spirit that will change their lives and heal them from those things for which there is no other kind of healing. Lewis Smedes wrote *Forgive and Forget*. It is not a great book, but a good book. There is one especially important statement in it. He says we should all forgive unconditionally, as God does, but we should not forgive and forget, as God does. We should forgive and remember. We should remember what we have forgiven, remember that it was forgiven, and leave it forgiven.

Nothing heals like forgiveness heals. It lifts the burden from the forgiver and then from the forgiven. We should remember to celebrate what has been forgiven. Keep the savor of the flavor of that experience alive in ourselves and in the forgiven ones. We should rejoice about it and take courage in it continually. If you and I do not cultivate the experience of forgiveness how will we recognize it when we arrive in our eternity where there is nothing but forgiveness?

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON NINE

THE CHRISTIAN WAY, FAITH OR HERESY?: LUKE 15:18-19, MATTHEW 20:1-15

"Are you jealous because I am generous."

It is not my desire in this sermon to provide you a nice sweet message of consolation. I want, instead, to disturb you with an idea that will stick in your mind and heart. I wish it to continue to percolate within you like a leaven in a loaf, exploding new insights, provoking growth. The idea has two sides, a comedy and tragedy. The tragedy takes a while to expound. The comedy can be briefly set forth.

I think it is a comic tragedy that the universal faith of all of us Christians throughout the history of the last 2000 years has always been dominated by a great variety of false teachings - heresies. We are all heretics and we all ought to settle with that up front. It is a very important part of our pilgrimage as disciples to realize that we are always coming at the issues of God's truth and our personal perceptions of truth from that precarious beginning point. We are all heretics. We are always tempted to perceive and formulate the faith in notions about God, ourselves, and eternal hope that are incomplete ideas at best. Certainly our insights are always in some way distorted from what reality must look like from God's perspective. To that extent our notions are incomplete and literally untrue. That means that they are false.

The church has generally tended to act dogmatically as though we really have captured God in our theological propositions and popped God into our vest pockets. The church has acted like it had God under control in the formulations of the creeds and theological definitions. That has never been true, of course, and it is an arrogant heresy to suppose so. We are all merely pilgrims in a quest for glimmers of understanding and we are always more blind than seeing because we are human. Our best perceptions of God's truth are human perceptions from this human and earthly side of the equation. Human insights are always limited by our human capacity to understand and by the earth-bound level of our information. We want definitions about God that are solid and water tight.

However, we cannot even speak or think about the things of God except in metaphors and other word pictures that we create out of our own imaginations.

The church has tended to act all through its 20 centuries as though we had available to us and under our control, God's ultimate truth. The fact is that we have never been able to approximate God's truth, as far as we can tell. Only God knows what the ultimate, absolute truth is. Moreover, God is very subtle. God reveals God's self to us only by intimations, not by plainly spoken theological treatises or specific detailed definitions. Therefore, my claim is that everybody inevitably falls into heresy. We perceive the truth about God in fragments and, therefore, falsely, distorted, and incomplete at best.

The real problem with that is not that there is something fundamentally wrong with our being simply human. The real problem with that is that being human and limited to human perceptions of the truth about God, eternity, and salvation we are in the dangerous position of making up ideations about God that cut the tap-root of God's real grace to us. That will always cut off the very source of our healthy spirituality. As soon as we formulate what seems inside of our hearts or minds to be a really good statement about how we understand and feel about God, we have already formulated a human concept, that is, a heresy. Now if we invest ourselves in that humanly fashioned commitment of faith we are immediately capturing ourselves in a limiting capsule of humanness. We are, therefore, fencing ourselves out of God's own grand perspective on what really is. It may be the best we can do, but our formulations will always be heretical.

Let me illustrate this from the parable of the prodigal son. In that wonderful story the prodigal son eventually decides that he has really blown it with his life and that it is profoundly ridiculous that he is starving in a pig pen while his father's servants are living in luxury. He realizes his life is a really bad joke! Driven by this desperation and starvation, the son thinks up a solution. He says to himself, "I will go to my father and I will say to my father, 'I have sinned in the sight of heaven and before your sight. I am not worthy to be your son. Hire me as a servant.'" So he got up and went home.

As the late German Evangelical Theologian, Helmut Thielicke, reminded us, this is a parable about two sons, the prodigal and the elder brother; but most of all it is really a story about the father. He has waited long years for the moment when his son discovered the bad joke he has made of his life. Everyday he looked down that dusty road to see whether his son might be coming home. Then one day he saw him – before the boy saw his father. His father ran to him, threw his arms around him,

kissed him, and welcomed him home.

Immediately the father began to plan the celebration he always had in mind for this moment of the son's return. But his son pushed him away and said, “Just a moment. You do not understand. I have sinned against you and against heaven. I am no longer worthy to be your son.” Well, at this point it sounds like the son has really been converted. He had arrogantly taken his inheritance, run away from home, spent all he owned, and now he has come back home acknowledging his wasteful self-destruction.

The young man seems to have been really changed. He has turned his life around. He has been converted from a runaway wastrel to a thoughtful fellow, oriented upon his father’s home and values. The difficulty is that the son has been converted straight into a heresy. He saw that he had sinned and completely mismanaged his life, wasted his family’s resources, and discovered that his life had been a bad joke. He realized that the servants' lives were meaningful in the graciousness of his father’s home, while his was desperate and deprived. Therefore, he asked his father to hire him as a servant.

There is the heresy. This son has really done everything wrong. He thought the solution was to work his way back into his father’s favor. He thought the solution was to have a chance for *self-justification*. The difficulty is that he could work for the next thirty years and do well, but it would not take away the fact that he wasted all of his inheritance and ruined the best years of his life. Self-justification does not fix that original problem. Self-righteousness and self-justification do not change the tragic history of that past. He thought they did. “Let me prove myself to you. Hire me as a servant and I will prove to you by being a diligent, responsible person, that despite my external behavior all these years, way down deep inside I really am a good guy. That’s the real me. I want a chance to show you that, father.” That outlook on life and relationship with our Father is a heresy.

The father’s response to that plea for self-righteousness and self-justification was definitive and radical. Allow me to read between the lines a little bit. In effect, the father said to the son: “You want to be my servant? How can you be my servant? You are my son! You are not my son because of the nature of your character or behavior. You are my son because of the nature of my character and behavior as your father. You are my son as long as I insist on being your father and I will never let you go. It does not depend on your qualities. It depends on my quality as your father and you cannot sin yourself out of my love. I am the one who stood waiting for you every morning. How can you be my servant? You are my

son! You are always my son in spite of yourself, because I will not give up being your father."

His father assured him that everything in the end is of grace: unconditional forgiveness and acceptance. Nothing else fixes all the wasted years and treasure and relationship. Nothing can explain it, excuse it, or justify it. The only thing that fixes that kind of colossal perfidy is forgiveness and unconditional love. Sin, fear, guilt, and shame are eliminated from the equation of God's relationship with us. They are not only discounted. They do not count anymore.

There are five heresies that we regularly fall into, any one of which can be spiritually defeating. The first one is the one I just described: substituting conditional grace and self-righteous for God's unconditional grace and uncalculating acceptance of us just as we are. Many people hold the common notion that God forgives, accepts, cherishes, and saves us because we please God, or because we confess our sins, or because we turn out in the end to be good people, or because we beg God for salvation. That almost universally reigning idea is a heresy. God does not accept, forgive, love, and save us because of the way we posture ourselves toward God. Such thinking is just backward. We posture ourselves appropriately toward God when we hear the good news that God forgives and saves us in spite of ourselves and not because of our strong efforts to make God love us or make ourselves worthy of God's love.

I firmly believe that any person who really gets the message that Gods forgiving grace to us is radical, unconditional, and universal always turns and says, "If that is how God feels about me I want to be God's kind of person." God is gracious because God is grace. God's grace exudes from God in such a constituent way that it is God's nature. God cannot help himself or herself. God cannot be anything but grace, in spite of our selves. Anything else would be untrue to God's inherent nature.

The second heresy that we tend to fall into and that can really ruin healthy spirituality is the notion that substitutes sentimentality for real love. Such a notion substitutes mere sympathy for true empathy, as though love means something "nice and sweet". That's too superficial. Sentimentality is a kind of self-indulgence. It's not real love for that other person. In a sense it is the opposite of the tough stuff that God-inspired love really is. True godly love is willing to intervene and renovate things if that is what is necessary to profit or heal the other person. That is true whether that person knows it or likes it. Christian love is the act of investing one's self arbitrarily in what the other person needs, not what the other person wants. In the end we have no choice but to "play God" because who is to decide what the other person needs? We are human so

we must use our best judgment, go for it, and love that person surgically, if necessary. We must initiate the change that needs to happen in that person's life insofar as we have the ability and responsibility to effect it graciously. Real love is surgical when necessary.

The third heresy that we tend to fall into is the notion that God has total power in this world and is, therefore, totally responsible for things. There are people who really believe that it is God's will if a little boy is killed by a tractor, or a volcano exterminates Columbians or Italians. The truth is that God is not in control of those things. God has created this world, set it in motion, and given it to us. God said to us: "You be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and you have dominion over it" (Genesis 1:28). If we do not act on behalf of Columbians who are sufficiently uninformed that they want to live at the side of a mountain that is vulnerable to mudslides, God cannot save them. If we do not act on behalf of Pompeians who live next to Mt. Vesuvius, which volcanically blows its top every thousand years, God cannot save the wonderful people of Pompeii and Herculaneum. If we do not act on behalf of those who are being treated unjustly in the world, God can not deliver them. If we do not constrain al Qaeda, God cannot. If we do not put an end to genocide, God cannot end it.

If we do not stop the Hitlers, Mussolinis, Stalins and bin Ladins of this world, and abusive leaders in our own country, God cannot hem in the consequences of their mayhem. God takes us so seriously that God leaves it up to us. God will not violate the inherent dynamics of our personality development to solve our problems for us. God will not intervene upon the cause and effect processes in history in order to straighten things out and pay us off on Saturday night. It is up to us to do so.

If we do not act God cannot act. If we do not warn God cannot save endangered people. If we do act providence cannot bless. Providence is always responsive and not initiatory. However, if we initiate proper action God can providentially prosper it or withhold his prospering spirit from our undertakings if they are not workable. It is a heresy to think that God is in control and to count on God to change things when that is not God's business or responsibility or option. Sometimes we prayerfully hope against hope for God to intervene when we should be translating our prayerful reflection into sweat action to change the world.

The fourth heresy that tends to wreak havoc on the spirituality of Christians is the notion that Christianity is an individualized religion in which personal piety is separate from the reformative demands of love and justice in the church and in society. Presbyterians and Methodists have tended to be in the forefront of social action in this world, in God's name.

That has taken a great deal of Christian treasure and devoted hours over the decades and centuries. That is as it should be. But in the process we made some bad choices that landed us in a kind of Churchianity instead of Christianity. We seem always tempted toward a kind of project Christianity instead of authentic and useful Christian action in the world. This usually happens when we split off our social action from the wellsprings of personal spirituality and sound theology.

Whether we have funded or promoted Angela Davis, protests on Hobart street, anti-Vietnam militancy, or World Council of Churches' actions against intervention in Iraq, it has tended to be much "sound and fury signifying nothing." The reason for the irrelevance is that such things frequently have not come out of a profound theology or a pervasive personal spirituality.

On the other hand, living personal spirituality with no consequences on the reformative needs of church in society is a sham. It, too, is a heresy. It is a trivialization of what it means to be called of God in Christ. The reform, the constant reformation of the church and society, moves and derives from the power of profound personal faith. If personal spirituality does not produce reformation in church and society, if it does not lead to growth and renewal, it does not meet the basic rubrics of true faith.

The final heresy that is pervasive in the religious world is the notion that there is such a thing as cosmic evil. Christians have for too long operated with the false notion that there is an evil force in God's world which has some kind of equivalence to the force of God's presence. It is a heresy to believe that we are perpetually up against that ethereal evil force. It is a heresy to continue to promote the notion that there is some kind of negative god out there that is fighting the kingdom of God and it is unclear who will win that contest.

There is no evidence for the existence of a devil, Satan, or hell. None! There is no empirical evidence of it. You and I cannot cite a single instance in all of history that would lead us to the conclusion that there is anything out there besides God in his creation, providence, and grace. There is no evidence for anything else in experience; or in scripture properly read and understood. The notion that there were devils or the Devil or hell never entered into the biblical faith tradition until the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. Then they got those heretical ideas from an alien religion called Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism is a religion in which the notion of God and Devil, light and darkness, good and evil are equal forces arrayed against each other in life and history.

The reason that the Israelites in Babylonian exile hooked into that pagan idea for which there was no evidence was that they thought it

answered their main question. It explained how it was possible that God's wonderful people, the Israelites, got overrun by the Babylonians and were carried off into exile. They were trying to explain an existential fact in their history and they adopted this pagan notion in order to explain it. They decided that they had somehow gotten themselves on the wrong side of the cosmic war.

That perspective, of course, was the cultural matrix into which Jesus was born and in terms of which he related his message. So he used those metaphors and that language sometimes. It is surprising how seldom he did, of course. Incarnation means that he was so human that he was conditioned by his humanness and his cultural setting and ideas. He had to speak in the language and metaphors of his moment if he were to speak at all. He himself made that plain to us at a number of places in the gospels. He said that no one knew when the end of history would be, not even the Son of Man, only the Father. His humanness limited him as we are limited. The Epistle to the Hebrews says, "He was like one of us except he was without sin."

To suppose that evil is a supernatural force out there, arrayed against God, is to skew the entire perspective of Christian life before the face of God. There is nothing out there except God. Evil does not exist in this world except in the nasty things we do to each other. Even if we seem to be trying to speak against evil, it is an idolatrous idea. It is a heresy to idolize evil as though it is something out there approximately as big as God and as supernatural as God.

I notice in the press and online that the books by Tim LaHaye about the rapture are being advertised now as Christian films. My friends, they are not *Christian.* They are heresy. That Tim LaHaye stuff is sheer paganism. It is very popular and it is going to get more popular among Christians because Christians are really trying, generally speaking, to do the right thing, and think the right way and figure out things about the meaning of life and eternity. Tim LaHaye seems to be telling us how to figure things out. The difficulty with it is that his novels reflect pagan undercurrents - references to hell and the devil, and it seems to give us a total solution for how to look at the world.

It is not a Christian perspective. It is a pagan perspective straight out of Zoroastrianism; and if you adopt that perspective it fundamentally corrupts the possibility that you can see the world in terms of God's worldview. God's worldview, we know clearly from the Bible, is a worldview of the unconditional and saving grace of God to you and me and all humans, past, present, and future. You cannot take the Tim Lahaye perspective and still really hear that you are unconditionally forgiven,

forever for everything. Tim Lahaye is wrong. His gospel is a Zoroastrian paganism and it is important that Christians recognize it for the heresy that it is. It cuts the tap root of God's radical, unconditional, and universal grace in our lives. It is against the gospel. Well, that is the tragic side of our common odyssey: those five heresies. We are all heretics. We are all humanly limited. Only God knows the whole story of the real truth.

That is why God's side of the story is the comic side. Our quest in human life is a comic tragedy. The comic side of our inevitable heresy is that God is not a heretic. God cherishes us. God saves us, unconditionally, forgivingly, and permanently, in spite of ourselves. In spite of our humanness! In spite of our heresies! In spite of our limitations and confusion! In spite of our wrong-headedness! In spite of our wasteful disobedience that comes from that human limitation! The comic side of this is that God is not a heretic because God is God, and grace is grace. For twenty centuries many Christians have believed that God forgives most sins except that God does not forgive a theological mistake. The church often gave the impression that if we get things wrong in our description about God and God's work in our world we are doomed.

The truth is that God forgives theological mistakes just like God forgives moral, ethical, or relational errors. There is no sin, iniquity, failure, or inadequacy that is not covered by God's forgiving grace. God's grace is so radical, unconditional, and universal for all humanity that there is no soul that can sin himself or herself out of God's forgiving grace, nor squirm out of God's eternal embrace of us all. God is not a heretic. God is gracious and full of grace, because God is grace! Grace is God's essence, personality, and nature. That is the comedy of redemption in the face of our inescapable heresy.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TEN

IS GOD'S REIGN REAL?: ACTS 1:1-8

You shall be Exhibit A in the Courtroom of World Opinion

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses … to the ends of the earth." The Christian Movement was a surprising new initiative in the world of its time. It promoted care instead of coercion and peace instead of power. Jesus had a special name for this notion. He called it the reign of God breaking in upon the world. He said that wherever people acted in his name for care rather than coercion and for peace instead of power, the Kingdom of God was present in that place. Jesus spoke a great deal about the Kingdom or reign of God. In fact, you could surely say that whenever Jesus spoke, what he said could be summarized in terms of his claim that the reign of God was breaking in upon the world wherever the presence or Spirit of the Son of Man could be seen, namely the spirit of Jesus himself.

The Kingdom was coming. It was in the process of breaking in. It was preparing to break in everywhere all the time in any setting with anyone. The disciples came to him one time and said, "We found a man casting out demons in your name and we forbid him because he is not one of us." Jesus said, "If he is not against us he is for us. The Kingdom of God is breaking in through him as well."

Jesus spoke rather abstractly about the reign of God. One of the things that is troublesome about the gospel record is that it too speaks abstractly about the Kingdom. Very little effort is invested in the gospel narrative or in Jesus' words to define for us what the concept, Kingdom of God, meant to him and what it ought to mean to us. Jesus and the early church tended to speak abstractly and in global terms about the God's reign. However, Jesus acted very concretely in enacting the reign of God on earth. He healed the sick, comforted the bereft, and raised the dead. He acted concretely and finitely; and whenever he acted he said the Kingdom of God was present in his actions.

His emphasis upon the Kingdom was in a very specific setting. The People of Israel had been thinking and talking about the Kingdom of God for a thousand or fifteen hundred years by the time of Christ. In fact, they had talked about it so much that the prophets are full of notions about the Kingdom of God. Not only that, the Jews had extremely idealized the notion of the Kingdom of God. They had come to see it as the golden age of David. They interpreted the prophets as promising a kingdom for Israel that stretched from the Tigris River on the North to the Nile on the south: from Iraq to Egypt, the entire west leg of the Fertile Crescent. This is what they remembered as the domain of their kingdom in the days of David and Solomon.

So this became their perpetual vision of the Kingdom; very much like the Islamic vision of the Kingdom of God today. Muslims tend to think of the Kingdom of God as the ideal domain of Islam, stretched from the Straights of Gibraltar, on both sides of the Mediterranean, to Indonesia. They call this widest expanse of Islam during its heyday, the Umma, the Islamic geographic domain. What makes them really mad at us is that we have set foot upon their sacred Umma. We are present in their domain and, therefore, it is defiled in their view. I would be upset about that too if I believed in their doctrine of the Umma.

Jesus' notion of the Kingdom of God was set in the context of an Israelite notion of geographical domain similar to the Muslim Umma - the domain of the divine reign. Of course, as with Islam, this notion of geographical domain also had political, social, economic, and spiritual overtones. The Israelites, seeing themselves as the special people of God, had always hoped for the day when the golden age of David's political power and domain would be restored. Then foreign oppressors would be thrown out of their domain. Israel would also be spiritually renewed in body, mind, and spirit. They had this long hope for renewal materially, psychologically, intellectually, and spiritually. By Jesus time, they had waited for this great day for nearly a millennium.

Following the end of the Exile in Babylon about 500 BCE, there had been a great deal of turbulence in the way in which Israelites conceived of this hope. Many had given up. They had decided that God had stopped speaking to them and perhaps had abandoned them. They feared that God had forgotten his people. They thought that the Kingdom or Reign of God in this world might not be real. They had begun to worry that the Kingdom would never come. The Pharisees believed, as Jesus did, that the Kingdom would come by spiritual renewal. They had a different idea than Jesus about how that could be made to happen. They thought that by imposing spiritual and social regulation on people, the spiritual renewal

would happen. Regulation and enforcement was their solution. They believed in a spiritual renewal, nonetheless, as did the Samaritan Jews. The Samaritans looked for another prophet like Moses who would bring in the Kingdom of God among them (Deut 18:15).

When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well she said that she believed the Messiah would come and answer all her questions. What were her questions? Spiritual questions about when, where, and how to worship authentically: the nature and place of true worship. They were questions about the things of the heart and the spirit - about what it is like if God reigns in ones personal spirituality. The Samaritans had preserved that ancient tradition from Deuteronomy 18:15 that God would raise up a prophet like Moses who would restore the Umma, the domain and the spirituality of Israel as the people of God.

When Jesus came on the scene, the Kingdom seemed distant to most Israelites and God seemed silent. It had been 400 years since the last prophet; and the rabbis were beginning to say that the age of the prophets and the time of divine revelation was past. God would not speak again. God could be known only through the revealed documents that Israel already had. Those became the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. There was no more to be added. The word was in and that was it and nobody knew why God had disappeared. Fortunately, God had left these sacred documents of the prophets but that was all Israel had to hang on to.

So the new initiative that Jesus brought, and its new notion of the reign of God breaking in, must have been a great surprise to many of them. Initially that should have been a good sound to the Pharisees. We probably need to look at Jesus' debate with the Pharisees as Robert Frost spoke of his poetry. He said it was a lover's quarrel with the world. Jesus' debate with the Pharisees was probably a lover's quarrel. They were constantly making jokes about each other, saying snide things about each other, reviling each other, kidding each other, debating and teasing each other. It was a lover's quarrel. They both knew that both were interested in the spiritual renewal of Israel and the coming of the Kingdom.

Jesus had a special notion, however, as to how the Kingdom was to come. He said the Messiah was not going to be a son of David to sit on David's throne, throw out the Romans, and build an earthly kingdom in Israel. "My Kingdom is within you. My Kingdom is not of this world. If it were then would my servants fight. You shall see the Son of Man coming from heaven with the power of God. My Kingdom is a heavenly and spiritual Kingdom." Those must have sounded like strange and perhaps disappointing noises to the Pharisees – indeed to most of Israel. He said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to him and his domain. Give to

God what belongs to God and God's domain." He meant for them to stop all the notions of socio-political revolution and concentrate upon developing the things of the heart and spirit.

Thus Jesus sent out his disciples, two by two, on the mission of proclaiming the Kingdom. He said, "If you come to any house and say to the people, 'Shalom!' and they return your greeting of peace then you know that the Kingdom is coming near to that house. If they do not return your greeting of peace shake the dust from you feet and go on, for that house is not near the Kingdom. The reign of God's grace and love is not breaking in there."

Jesus had this notion that the Kingdom breaking in had to do with a specific action in a local place by an individual person with regard to a special need. This was not a theoretical abstraction. It was not just some global vision which never really comes to ground and never really stirs any pay dirt. For Jesus it was concrete, specific, individual, and pragmatic. It was designed to get some work going. If they do not respond in keeping with your spirit, expressing the presence and reign of God's love and grace, then depart. The Kingdom is not coming near to them in that household.

He set a little child in their midst. They had tried to chase the street urchins and the school children of the town away from Jesus. The disciples thought Jesus was too important, too busy, or too weary for children to bother him. So Jesus turned and called the children to him. He set them in the middle of the town square. Then he declared that if the adults did not become like these children: trusting, believing, simple, inquiring, hungry for knowledge and love, expecting care instead of coercion and peace instead of power, the adults would not be equipped to see the Kingdom bursting in around them when it happened. They could never see the Kingdom come for they had no eyes to see it or ears to hear it.

The Kingdom is a special and subtle thing. In our day and for the last 20 centuries the church has said a lot of things about the Kingdom of God, the coming of the Kingdom, and strategies for bringing in the Kingdom in this world. I suppose that Christians have always thought that it is a specific and an important responsibility to be bringing in the Kingdom. I am sure I have said a lot about that from my various pulpits over the years. But we tend also to sound like we are talking about abstractions and global visions, as did Jesus and the ancient Israelites. It is a lot easier to stay in that world of theory and visions than it is to come to ground and mean things that are very concrete.

Now we do a lot of concrete things in the church that express the presence of the reign of God. When we have a successful blood drive the

Kingdom has come near us. When we teach the children the way of God's reign of the love that heals and the grace that works the Kingdom is breaking in. When we assemble for an enjoyable and meaningful worship experience the Kingdom of God is near us. Count on it, my friends in Christ, Jesus would say, "The Kingdom is there!" You will know it if you have the eyes and ears for it. When the choir delivers one of its illustrious anthems of praise and glory the Kingdom is present and Jesus would say so, were he sitting in one of the pews.

The reign of God is concrete, specific, individual. When a congregation does a specific thing for a person or a need, in which care is promoted versus coercion and peace is promoted rather than power, God is reigning there. Then the Kingdom is near. One morning on the way to church some years ago I heard that the UN has prompted the European Union to issue Serbia an ultimatum that they will get no assistance from the EU nor have the opportunity to enter the European Economic Community unless tomorrow they deliver General Mladavic to the Hague Court for war crimes trial. In that kind of concrete action for justice, my friends, the Kingdom came near to us, and was breaking in upon our world.

Whenever an action for justice succeeds, whenever a ministry of loving care is carried out, whenever a suffering human is delivered from addiction or abuse, whenever a mother suckles a child with love and tenderness God is in it and God's reign is breaking in. Every time you commit a random act of kindness God reigns there in that event.

Last evening I went to the Post Office to mail some letters. I noticed a fellow standing next to his car and looking forlorn. I recognized him as a person from the local Presbyterian Church but did not know his name. I asked him if he needed help, at which he said he had locked his keys and his wallet in his car including his AAA card. I have AAA so I called and in 30 minutes they opened his car. So for 45 minutes, my friends, the Kingdom was present in a very practical and specific way in that parking lot.

It is concrete, personal, individual. It is here and not there, depends on us and not somebody else, right now and not some abstract ethereal vision for the future. It is where the action to meet the need is. That is why the Bible says, "Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might."

The disciples never really caught on to the real meaning of all this until long after Jesus had departed. Even the last day they saw him they were still asking if he were going to reestablish David's Kingdom in Israel that day. He responded profoundly, "I will tell you about the reign of God" said he. "The Kingdom is breaking in and will come by the power of God as Spirit. The Divine Spirit will infuse your spirits so that you will be

Exhibit A in the court room of world opinion. You will be my presence in your communities, my presence to the person next to you. You will illustrate what it means that the reign of God is present in human experience." Our translation says we will be his witnesses. The Greek word is *marturion*, meaning a court room exhibit. Whenever you stop to make life better, easier, more comfortable, hopeful, or illumined for someone, you are enacting the reign of God. Whenever you make more successful some wholesome organization, you have effected there God's reign of grace and love. Every kind person in the world, in every random act of kindness, makes God's reign present in this world. It is happening all the time nearly everywhere. If you have the simplicity of spirit a child has, you will notice it. "Whatever your hand finds to do in God's name, do it with all your might!"

Amen. So let it Be!

Sermon Eleven

Son of Man – Son of God: John 3:13-18

God sent the Son of Man that whoever believes on him shall not perish
but shall have eternal life; for God sent him not to condemn but to save the world.

I understand that one of our neighboring churches was recently infested by an enormous number of squirrels. The congregation is ecologically responsible and moral about protecting God's creation, so they caught all of those squirrels in live traps and they took them out into the country and released them into a large swamp. The striking thing was that the next Sunday all the squirrels were back. They did this a couple more times and every Sunday all the squirrels were back. Then one of the elders hit upon a solution. They baptized all the squirrels into membership and from then on they only showed up on Christmas and Easter.

When you read the Bible it looks like the whole point of it has to do with God's moves towards us to draw us nearer to God. That is not just a Christmas and Easter enterprise, not even just a Sunday enterprise, but the business of life every moment of every day: God is always drawing near to us, in order to draw us near to God. I suppose that if the Christian movement had taken that notion as its creed, from the outset, it would have spoiled all of the fun of the theologians. There would have been nothing to argue about and little to write about except the celebration of God's intervention in God's world, drawing near to us so that we might be drawn near to God.

In the passage that we have read this morning Jesus is referred to as the Son of Man and as the Son of God. A number of times in this passage he is referred to as the Son of Man, and only once, in the last verse (18) is he referred to as the Son of God. Jesus is called by many different names in the scripture. In the Old Testament the Messiah is referred to by numerous symbolic terms. In the New Testament the person, Jesus from Nazareth, that man who walked around the dusty roads of Palestine 2000 years ago, is also referred to sometimes by those symbolic OT names. In the New Testament he is often called by brand new names, not only his given name

Jesus, but Christ, Son of Man, Son of God, Son of David, King, and Priest. There is almost an endless list of terms to designate Jesus. This has provoked a great deal of discussion and debate over the centuries about who Jesus really was, is, thought he was, intended to be, was supposed to be in God's grand design, and what all of that has meant, or ought to mean. In the end it comes down to the fact that, in Jesus, God drew near to us so that we might be drawn near to God.

Jesus only ever referred to himself as the Son of Man. In John 3 Jesus is in a conversation with Nicodemus and refers to himself frequently. He refers to himself in that passage as the unique Son, the Son of Man, who is also the unique Son of God. What could possibly be meant by all of that? Already Paul, in developing early Christian theology, was busy trying to figure out what that could possibly mean. What could it mean for Jesus to call himself the Son of Man? What could it mean for the disciples to have begun, rather quickly after his death and resurrection, to refer to him almost only as the Son of God? What could it possibly mean that he said he would send his spirit, which is God as spirit, into the world? Why do we, in our day, almost always refer to Jesus as the Son of God, and almost never, unless we are having some specialized kind of esoteric conversation, refer to him the way he always referred to himself? We never call him the Son of Man when we are talking about him. What can we possibly mean by always calling him the Son of God, a term he never used regarding himself?

When John used the term, Son of God, in verse 18, he was using it in a classic Jewish sense, referring to a righteous man. That is why Paul can say of us that we are all sons of God, or daughters of God. Repeatedly in the Bible and in the Greek and Roman culture of biblical times, people were referred to as sons of god. Simon Magus was a spiritual leader and miracle worker among the Samaritan Jews just at the time that Jesus and his disciples were doing miracles among the Palestinian Jews. Simon Magus was referred to as the son of god, and so was Alexander the Great, of course, and Hercules among many others, because in those days, the word or term *Son of God* simply meant, a righteous man.

When Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, it was a much more superior title than referring to him as the Son of God, even as John does is verse 18, the unique Son of God. John says that Jesus is the unique Son of God in the sense that he is more than the sons of god that everyone else is referring to. He is the unique Son of God, in the sense that he is the Son of Man and because he is the Son of Man. In Jewish tradition the Son of Man was one who descended from God, revealed all the divine heavenly mysteries, and returned to God. In John's gospel, the last word of the New

Testament to be written, there is no second coming, no judgment day, no cataclysmic end to history. In John's Gospel, the Son of Man is not a judge but the savior. He came from heaven as the Logos of God and returns there after revealing the mysteries of God's unconditional grace that will save all humans in the final analysis.

So the first meaning of the term *Son of God* was righteous man. For 2000 years now the church has been wrestling with how to use that term, *Son of God*. Soon after the close of the age of the Apostles, the end of the first century, the terms *Son of Man,* and *Son of God*, started to be used in a radically different sense than in the Bible. The early church fathers referred to Jesus as the Son of Man, meaning his human nature. They meant the man from Nazareth, who, like the rest of us, had a body and a mind and walked around and got dirty feet and had to have them washed and so forth.

By the end of the second century the term Son of Man referred to Jesus' humanness, and the term Son of God had been exalted. It had come to mean the divine side of Jesus. Thus, by 325, when the Council of Nicea met to write the creeds of the church, the big debate was about how you define the divine nature of Jesus as the Son of God, and the human nature of Jesus as the Son of Man. Since that day when our creeds were formulated, we have been discussing that issue and those creedal concepts rather than considering the biblical meaning of the terms. So we ask ourselves today, "What exactly do we mean when we say, 'the Son of God'?"

Paul wrestled with that constantly. The creeds had not yet been written but the story of the life of Jesus was already well established in the memory of the Christian community. Paul was trying to write the theology of the Christian movement in a way that would explain who this person, Jesus, really was. In what sense does he draw near to God, in what sense does he come from God, and in what sense does he draw near to us as God's presence and Spirit with us? In what sense then does he attempt to draw us near to God? How does that work? What are the mechanics of that? Paul wrestled with that in his epistles, and in the end, Paul, I think, gave up on trying to figure that all out. Finally, Paul sort of throws up his hands and he says, well all I know is this, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto God's self." He might as well have said that God in Christ drew near to us so that he might draw us near to God. That's what it came down to for Paul.

When the time came for writing the creeds, the busy preoccupation with exact legal definitions about how to define divinity and humanity in Jesus ended up with a formulation that is completely different from the

Bible's definitions. In the creeds and in our language today when we refer to the Son of God, we do not refer to just a righteous man. We mean that in Jesus we have present with us a piece of God. Even that is a clumsy way of saying it. We mean that Jesus stands in our midst in history, so to speak, and when we look at him, we can see the nature and expected behavior of God. The way Jesus handled people is the way God handles us, with gentleness, forgiveness, kindness and radical grace. God is in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self, drawing us near to God.

In John's gospel the watershed issue, as expressed in verse 18, is that we should identify ourselves with this unique Son of God (righteous man) because he is the Son of Man (divine revealer of the heavenly mysteries about radical grace). That is, he is the one in whom all the mysteries of God are revealed to us. "God so loved the world that he gave his uniquely begotten son, *the Son of Man*, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but should have eternal life, for God sent *the Son of Man*, into the world not to condemn the world." Remember the Jewish idea was that the Son of Man came, told us the mysteries of God, preached the kingdom, and returned to heaven. John 3:17 says “God sent not the Son of Man into the world to condemn the world, but that the whole world through him should be saved." Then John said that being saved had to do with believing in the name of the unique Son of God, because he is the Son of Man - God's revealer. What is unique about the Son of God? It is that he is the Son of Man who had been promised in the OT and came to us in Jesus of Nazareth as the incarnation of God’s nature, the Logos (Word) of God - God's self-expression.

Well how should you and I take all of that in our day? What does that mean for us? However you define those terms, what does it mean that in Jesus of Nazareth 20 centuries ago God entered history to draw near to us so that we could be drawn near to God? How are we to be the Christ-ones in the world, as Jesus was God’s unique One in the world? As I have mentioned to you before, Marcus Borg, a theologian of the Episcopal Church, has a unique way of saying it. He says, “Jesus was a man with a life full of God" and God draws us to himself by inviting us, in Christ, to be people with a life full of God.

Probably in the end it does not make a whole lot of difference what we mean by those names, those terms by which the Bible teaches us to know Jesus Christ. In the end it probably does not make a whole lot of difference whether we get the definition of Son of God, or Son of Man, or Christ, or Messiah right? Probably in the end the issue really is what hearing his story does to us, as interpreted by Paul and John. The final issue is what

hearing that story of the ancient faith of the church comes to mean for us personally and how it shapes our lives.

A fellow was driving down the highway and a woman behind him was obviously very much in a hurry, very exasperated, constantly trying to get around him in a narrow area with heavy traffic. She was blowing her horn and tailgating him dangerously. As he approached a traffic light it turned and he stopped rather quickly. She could not stop in time and bumped his car. It did not seem like it had done any harm, but in his mirror he saw the woman gesturing and talking to herself, obviously angry and behaving badly.

A police officer pulled up behind her, put his lights on, got out of his car, tapped on her window, and told her to get out of the car and put up her hands. He handcuffed her and carried her off to the police station. They booked her, threw her into a cell, and left her there for hours. When the officer returned he said, "I'm sorry ma'am, this was a complete mistake. We'll get your personal effects and you can go. The problem, however, was this, I pulled up behind you and I saw you cursing and swearing at the guy ahead of you, flipping him off and behaving very aggressively. Yet, on the back bumper of your car I saw the slogan, 'What would Jesus do?' and 'Have you been to church today?' and "Hug your child" and a lot of wonderful Christian sayings, so I concluded that you had stolen that car."

Maybe, in the end, it does not make so much difference what our definitions, creeds, and slogans say. Maybe in the end it comes down to what our behavior says.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWELVE

RELIGIONS AND THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION: ROMANS 8:28-39, 14:10-12, PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11

God highly exalted Jesus with a name more important than any other name,
So that at his name every eye should see Jesus ... every knee bow in
heaven, earth, and Sheol ... and every tongue confess ... Christ as Lord

God does not *require* anybody to be religious. All of us are, *by our very nature*, spiritual. We are created that way. It is not one's religion that really counts in human life. What really *counts* is spirituality. Spirituality is an inherent quality and characteristic of being human. We are simply fashioned to be spiritual, just as we are simply wired to be sexual. Spirituality and sexuality are two expressions of the same life force within us. Spirituality is the name we give to those urges of our inner natures that reach out for meaning and urge us toward communion with God. It is our inherent and irrepressible hunger to be in touch with ultimate, transcendent meaning. When those same urges reach out for relationship, communion, and union with other persons, we call that sexuality. Both are aspects of the image and nature of God within us.

Spirituality *produces* religion. Religious practices, in turn, reinforce and cultivate the form or shape of our spirituality. Religion is the variety of practices that humans create to explore, express, describe, and celebrate our spiritual longings and insights. Because we irrepressibly seek God in our spiritual hunger, we try to find ways of concretizing the insights we believe we get about God in our spiritual quest. 1) Those insights we formulate into religions rituals of worship to express our *feelings* about the meaning of it all. 2) We formulate those insights into religious doctrines to express our *ideas* about the meaning of it all. 3) We formulate those insights into *codes of conduct* and call them our ethics and morality.

Christian religion has one set of basic worship rituals, one set of basic theological doctrines, and one set of basic ethical and moral codes. This is true even though there are numerous variants of these in the many

different Christian denominations. Judaism has another set of worship rituals, theological doctrines, and ethical codes. Islam has yet another set of each. Hinduism, Baha'ism, Taoism, and all the other religions of the world have their own unique worship rituals, theological doctrines, and ethical codes. Buddhism and Confucianism likewise, though they are systems of ethical philosophy without much of a tangible theology, also have their special religious practices and codes of conduct.

Religion is *universal* among humankind because spirituality is universally *inherent* to our human nature. Even atheists are religious in that their notion that God does not exist is an act of faith. They do not have empirical evidence on which to found their faith that God does not exist. Moreover, one needs a lot more evidence to rule out the God question than to rule it in, because there seem to be so many intimations in all of creation and history that God has acted, is acting, and is present to us in our human experiences. Those intimations are enough to compel us to acknowledge that God is a reality to be taken into account. There is never enough evidence to rule out the possibility of God's existence and presence. Atheism is the most hilariously ridiculous of all faith hypotheses.

All religions are important. Some are better than others. What makes a religion important and valuable is the degree to which it reflects and produces a healthy and authentic inner human spirituality. This may manifest in individual persons and communities of committed believers. The more authentic a religion is to the true nature of healthy human spirituality the more healing and helpful a religion it is. The more a religion cultivates and thereby enhances that inner spirituality of persons, the more authentic, healthy, and better that religion is. All religions express the human quest for God, for the meaning of life, and for the purposes of the world. All perceive this quest in terms of the nature and presence of God. Those religions that clarify the experience of God and the meaning life most crisply and accurately quite obviously are psychospiritually more life-enhancing religions than those that do not clarify that quite so well.

Some religions portray God as a threat and create religious practices to placate God and keep God under control. Such religions are primitive in form, reflecting a childish kind of spirituality. They are destructive of authentic religion and healthy spirituality. They are less than helpful religious behavior and reflect an inferior form of healing spirituality. Some religions are very vague about God and tend to talk about God in abstract philosophical ways. They give the impression that God is a principle of thought and logic rather than a cherishing Spirit. Such religions tend to be more humanistic than God-centered or theological.

They tend to be stimulating to our minds but do not do much for the soul. That is, they reflect a more superficial form of spirituality and an unsatisfying experience of religious expressions in the forms of worship, theology, and conduct.

So it is important for us to understand that all religions have behind them the universal and irrepressible human quest for meaning. We hunger particularly for 1) meaning that relates us to God, 2) the meaning of the material world, 3) ultimate meaning, and 4) our relationship to the transcendent world of reality. We know what it means for a religion (a) to express our *relationship to God.* When we mention (b) our relationship to the world and to *ultimate meaning* we refer to this world and to life everlasting after death. When we speak of (c) our relationship to the *transcendent* world of reality we mean to speak of our awareness of and participation right now in the world of God's realm of life and heavenly existence. St. Paul makes it clear that eternal life is our experience of sharing in that divine world of God's reality right now while we are still on this earth and in this life. Paul meant by that to inform us that it is possible right now to live in the relief of God's forgiving grace and experience what it means to enjoy God's quality of life right here and now. It amounts to the joy of knowing that we cannot sin ourselves out of God's grace nor squirm out of God's long embrace.

Religions that promote that kind of theology of radically unconditional and universal grace, and the forms of worship and behavior that are appropriate to faith in such grace, are religions that make us spiritually and psychologically healthy and whole. They represent God accurately and ring true to our own God-given inner spiritual natures. They are true religions and others are not. Thus religions of grace are better religions than those of threat or ambiguity about God. They are so much better that, to be honest, we are compelled to say that religions of grace are true religions and religions of God-threat are not because they do not represent God accurately.

A lot of folks think that all religions 1) are equivalent paths to God, 2) that it makes little or no difference which path one follows, and 3) that all come out in the right place in the end. The first two parts of that notion are incorrect and the third is accurate. (a) Religions are not all equivalent paths to God. Some are good ones and some are not. Some lead us to God's embrace of radical, unconditional, and universal grace and some do not. Some show us the true and living God and some promote a notion of God as a threat. Therefore, (b) it does make a great deal of difference which path one follows. However, (c) all humans come out in the right place in the end. "Every eye shall see God, every knee shall bow, and

every tongue shall confess that Christ is Lord, to the glory of God." So nothing, not even our ignorance and unknowing, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:37-39). Not even bad religion in the final analysis can keep us from God and God's grace.

Nonetheless, you will hear many people mouthing those two wrong headed ideas and the number seems to be increasing. The reason for that is a lack of insight and healing spirit! Spiritual ignorance is taking over the world. That notion that all religions are equivalent paths and each is as good as the other is a result of two facts. First, it is a reaction to the long history of religions in which most adherents to any faith community acted and spoke as though their faith community was the only one that had an edge on the truth of God. People got sick of that arrogant nonsense. Especially young people get sick of that kind of narcissism and xenophobia. Second, many people today do not have any of the basic information about the history and teachings of religions, even of their own religion, nor an understanding of the nature of their own spirituality.

Until WW II most people had a working knowledge of their own faith community: its worship practices, theology, and ethical standards. That is no longer the case. A vast vacuum of spiritual emptiness and religious naivete' has pervaded all human societies in the last hundred years. The world has reverted to spiritual primitivity and childishness. That vacuum has been flooded with an immense volume of mutually pooled ignorance. You hear it all over all the time. New Age thinking is the classic example of this. The Church of Scientology is the most remarkable illustration of that false religiosity created out of the thin blue air from gross dumbness and arrogant ignorance. Ignorance is forgivable and curable through teaching. Arrogant ignorance is incurable.

I do not say this to pump up or promote Christianity as the perfect religion. It has never been the perfect or perfectly true religion. I say this, instead, because some religions are false and so do not work for spiritual depth and health, and so their religious forms are destructive rather than enhancing of the human quest. I believe that every person who has discovered in his or her faith quest that God is a God of radical, unconditional, and universal grace and forgiveness, is a person of true faith and true religion. That kind of person turns his or her life toward God, declaring that he or she wants to be God's kind of person. It makes no difference whether that person has arrived at that insight through Christianity, Judaism, the Sai Baba Fellowship, Islam, Baha'i, or any other form of the spiritual quest. If any person's faith is faith in God as a God of such grace, that faith is true and saving faith.

However, true faith must be the kind that gets around behind all our self-righteousness and attempts at self-justification. It crashes all our desire for conditional relationships rather than unconditional forgiveness and acceptance of each other. Authentic spirituality eclipses our need to be the only and special community of faith. Now, those of you who remember our text for today are going to raise a question. What about the fact that the scripture says that no one comes to God except through Jesus, and every eye shall see him, every knee bow, and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord, to God's glory? Good question! The right question! The answer is straight forward, as well. I am convinced that the central message of the Bible intends us to understand that ultimately all humans will extol Jesus as the supreme expression in history of God's love and grace for the world. However, many will come to faith in the God of grace without being able to name the name of Jesus Christ.

It is clear from the way that Socrates spoke about monotheism, for example, that he was quite sure that there was only one true and living God and that God was provident and gracious to humankind. Socrates was the famous Greek philosopher of the fifth century before Christ. He would have known nothing of Jesus Christ, of course. Even more illustrative of this is the salvation of all the Old Testament believers, whom God spoke of so cherishingly thousands of years before Jesus was born. Moreover, Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple that anyone who called upon the God of grace from anywhere in the world would have his prayer answered and his land blessed. All of us are troubled about the fact that so many humans lived and died without ever hearing of God visiting us in Christ. Many are still dying all over the world without being informed of what God expressed about God's self in Jesus of Nazareth. However, that does not mean they have not observed the works of God around them and come to faith in God's grace. Even the smallest degree of faith, smaller than a mustard seed, if it is faith in God's goodness and grace, is saving faith.

The most important biblical promise that all humanity would be embraced by God even if they did not know about Jesus is to be found in Abraham faith vision in Genesis 12 and 17. He perceived that God said to him, "I will be a God to you and your descendents after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant. I will be their God and they shall be my people and the nations of the earth shall be blessed because by your kind of faith in the God of grace." So everyone who grasps the fact that God is a God of radical, unconditional, and universal forgiveness, acceptance, blessing and goodwill to us is already living out of the redeeming sense of true faith. It is clear, therefore, that all those who have

lived and died without ever hearing of Jesus Christ, but have discerned the true nature of God's grace have the authentic vision of true faith.

Moreover, St. Paul declares in both of the passages read for today that everyone will eventually meet Christ and know him for who he is. In the end all paths will lead to God in Christ, directly or inadvertently, even for those who were all their life on a wildly wrong path. When each of us makes the transition from this life to the life to come, every one of our eyes shall see him, every one of our knees shall bow, and every one of our tongues shall confess that Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Ultimately every human will know the full truth of God's presence in history even more fully than God is currently visible to us in the Bible story.

So when people say all religions are equivalent paths to God, they fail adequately to understand religion and spirituality. The question in every case is simple: "Does your religion reveal to humans the God of grace, mercy, and peace?" If not, it does not tell the authentic story of God. It will cultivate a sick spirituality. If it does reveal the God of grace, it is a religion that is headed in the right direction and will induce a healthy spirituality and psychology. Christianity reveals the God of grace as personified in a human being whose way of handling human beings demonstrated how God handles us in goodness and grace. Unfortunately, even Christians often seem to remake Christianity into a religion of self-justification and salvation by good behavior. Paul says that it is by grace that we are saved, through faith, and that not by our good behavior - it is a gift of God, not of righteous conduct lest we should boast of self-righteousness (Eph 2:8-9).

Paul's capstone truth is thus, "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor heavenly powers, nor cosmic principles, nor earthly forces, nor things of the past, present or future, nor threats from on high, nor threats from below, nor anything else in all God's creation can separate us from the love of God that is expressed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:37-39). He continues six chapters later with this injunction: "Do not judge others or despise them for we shall all stand before God and every knee shall bow to God and every tongue shall praise God." In Philippians 2 Paul concludes, "God has exalted Jesus and given him a name that is superior to every name, so that at his name every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

So for Christians the simple question is, "Does your brand of Christianity give you the joyful sense of freedom in knowing that you are unconditionally, radically, and thoroughly accepted by God just as you are

right now, not as you ought to be or think you can become?" If not your spirituality is still childish or sick and your religion is not mature and healthy. If you *do experience* that joyful freedom in God's grace and you *do realize* that God is joyful about you *just as you are and where you are in your pilgrimage,* then your faith is *true*, your spirituality *mature*, and your religion *healthy*. When God looks at you God can only see that you are the *saint* God has made you to be by God's utter forgiveness,

There are lots of religions. All reflect the irrepressible and universal human qualities of spirituality. Some reflect sick spirituality. They have no grace. Some know grace, foster healthy spirituality, and express themselves in growth-inducing religious practices. That is the faith I stand for and proclaim. "Grace alone - a gift of God to every soul" (Eph 2:9).

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON THIRTEEN

A LITTLE STONE, A LITTLE WORD, A LITTLE FLAME: I SAMUEL 17:32-49, MARK 4:35-41, JAMES 3:5

Just look what a conflagration a little spark can kindle!

You may have seen the film entitled *Click*. It is about a man who is preoccupied with his industrious climb up the corporate ladder of promotion and achievements but eventually discovers that the little moments at home with his family are more important to him. You could summarize the message of the film in the words of a popular song of the 1950s: "Little Things Mean a Lot."

When I started to prepare this sermon I was perplexed in trying to figure out what common theme the framers of the lectionary saw that tied together their selected scriptures. I think I figured it out. I believe they were thinking of something like that song, Little Things Mean a Lot! These scriptures focus on a little stone, a little word, and a little flame. David's little stone killed a giant. Jesus' little word saved a ship. James notes that a little flame can cause a great conflagration - a loose tongue can cause much evil.

When I was an active soldier I was issued an officer's wall tent. That was a nice piece of basic equipment about the size of a 10' x 10' x 10' cube with a peaked roof. I had about 1000 cubic feet of space, just enough for a cot, a table, a desk, and a footlocker. Space enough for one officer to be very comfortable in the worst field conditions. Moreover, almost immediately upon my deployment overseas I found myself in the field in a snow and sleet storm that seemed to last from about the middle of December to the middle of March. I discovered during that ordeal that, despite temperatures well below zero, I could keep that tent at about 55 to 65 degrees with just the flame of one candle. Little things mean a lot.

Little things can be positive or negative, of course. One little flame on a candle in a wall tent can make life comfortable and good. It can even save your life. That same little flame in Mrs. O'Leary's lantern, kicked

over by her cow, burned down Chicago. Jesus' little word, “Peace,” could still a lethal turbulence, save a ship, and rescue its crew. But in 1812 one little word, “Forty-four Forty or Bust” could incite a war over the boundary between the USA and Canada. Soldiers and sailors died in that neglected war and the boundary of the northwestern states was settled permanently. Little things mean a lot.

A little stone can kill a giant or plug a hole in the dike and hold back the ocean. If you have traveled to Europe and visited the towering cathedrals in Cologne or Ulm you have noticed the grand gothic arches reaching heavenward as transcending testimonies to a powerful spirituality. Neither earthquake nor fire nor the bombings of WWII could bring down those heroically created superlatives of the human spirit, imagination, craft, and skill. Yet those gothic arches reaching out for the heavenly realm stay in place so firmly because of one little stone, the keystone of the arch. Little things mean a lot.

Last Wednesday a lovely little boy came into my clinic office, referred by his teacher because he does not talk. He can talk and he does talk to his mother, but he prefers not to talk to others. He may occasionally whisper but he does not speak aloud. This boy is one of the loveliest human beings I have met. He is very bright but he is silent. He seems unfamiliar with the sound of his own voice. He does not seem terrified or psychologically disturbed. He is very warm-hearted and open. He related to me easily. He was very pleased to show me his excellent art work. He did seem to have a sadness about him that I imagine comes from his sensing that all of us around him think he should be performing differently than he does. He probably concludes, “I am bad, maybe even dumb.” After getting a good sense of what was going on in his soul, I said to him one little sentence. I said, “Cyrus, you are actually a genius. I like you very much. In fact I love you.”

When I called him a genius, he brightened up as though his whole life was changed from anxious perplexity to joyful security. One little word gave him the signal that someone understood that he sees a world of reality beyond what most of his peers are aware of because he is a genius. He has always found this to be very humorful and he loves to play practical jokes. Now suddenly he realized this was not strange but ingenious. Somebody thought he was ok, in fact wonderful. One little sentence changed his sense of himself and of life. He is not talking much yet, but more than he did. I suggested to his mother that she teach him some children’s songs so he could sing them aloud and get acquainted with hearing his own voice. Similarly, I suggested she teach him to read

aloud and to memorize and recite short poems and the like. Little things mean a lot!

This is surely what prompted Jesus to declare that if we have faith as small as a grain of mustard seed – you nearly need a microscope to see it – we can metaphorically move mountains. That is, the smallest fleeting moment of trust in God's goodness and grace is true faith and that is saving faith. A little wisp of certainty of God's grace and love saves us from meaninglessness. Little things mean a lot.

As I mentioned above, little negative things can destroy, just as little positive things can build or cure. Rumors of complaint can destroy a community faster than compliments of gratitude can build it. We live in a world in which the mass media communication is largely negative criticism, cynical hopelessness, and airheaded trivia. The words and images are filled with the criticism of policy and hatred of the government. There is no report of the great achievements of our heroic soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, nor of the massive humanitarian and politically successful achievements of America around the world.

Too much of the mass media programming is trivial effluent from superficial persons who have little sense of history and no deep insight into what we are up against as local communities and as a nation. The media reflect little realization of what it means to operate in our world. They put their own comfort and professional promotion before the wellbeing of our country and the ideals for which we stand in this world. They seem unable to imagine what the horrible alternatives are to the sturdy course the USA has taken over the decades. The barrage of negative media can defeat and destroy America. A false word here and there can destroy our fair land and our precious and precarious experiment in democracy.

To shift the focus to the church and community of faith, little words of discouragement and mindless criticism in churches often undercut heroic attempts to enact the reign of God in this world. One little word, spoken in ignorance and arrogance, can destructively undercut important ministry. A careless negative word can drain the spirit out of a community of faith faster than the Divine Spirit can put it back in. There are people in this world who can drain the joy out of any moment, situation, relationship, or achievement quicker than you can realize what has happened. Just by their presence or a negative word or ignorant insensitivity they squeeze all the vital juices out of life's possibilities. On the other hand, there are folks who, just by entering a room or joining a conversation immediately empower everyone there and imbue the whole situation with excitement, joy, hope, and a sense of well-being.

A little dose of positive energy every time we have a chance can kill a giant of a problem, like David's little stone. It can still the fears and suffering of the storms of life and turn doubt to faith. It can give hope and joy where anguish seemed on the horizon. A little flame of spirit can either warm hearts and excite minds, or burn down the community, depending upon whether it is positive or negative in nature.

Our culture is in a negative mode today. We are Christians, people of faith and hope. We know that God is in our present national struggle and in the church's quest. It is not a futile irrational struggle or quest. Those who say it is are pathological. God is in it. However, it is up to us as the people of God to continually insinuate the positive word of faith, hope, and endurance into the pathological ordeal of negativity which pervades our society.

I have remarked on occasion about the Councilman from Virginia who wrote an encouraging letter to his friend, Thomas Jefferson, when Jefferson and Franklin sat with the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Those heroic leaders were trying to hammer out a constitution for the USA. The Revolutionary War was going badly. Jefferson's friend wrote, "Thomas, we know that the Bible says 'the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong', so do you not think that an angel rides in this whirlwind and directs the storm?" I was greatly heartened when, in his second inaugural address, our former president cited this story and confessed, "I believe that this race is not to the swift, nor this battle to the strong, but that an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs the storm." I believe that is true. It is the salvation of our troubled national government. I believe it is the sturdy Stream of the Divine Spirit that is shaping the destiny of the church and the future of our world. Our job is to get onboard that Stream of the Spirit in the random acts of grace we can faithfully fashion every day. A little stone, a little word, a little flame changed the world repeatedly long ago. Little things mean a lot.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON FOURTEEN

ALL YOU WHO LABOR:
JOHN 10:10

That you might have abundant life.

"I am come that you may have life and that you may have it abundantly." "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

One of the things that I really like about the Bible is that it is so big on rest. Right at the outset it tells us that God took a day off. Six days God labored. The seventh God rested. That very notion became a metaphor for the people of God throughout the scriptures. It keeps reappearing. In Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, where we have the 2 versions of the 10 Commandments, we are counseled by God through Moses that we should remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. "Six days you shall labor and do all of your work and the seventh is the Sabbath unto the Lord your God."

It is interesting that on the Sabbath day all we are enjoined to do is to keep it holy. I grew up in a church where people thought there were a lot more prescriptions for the Sabbath day than that. Do not ride a bicycle, but then I never had one anyway. Do not play baseball, a real constraint for a bunch of rambunctious boys like me and my brothers. The Bible simply says we should keep it holy and rest. As you read the Bible you discover that the metaphor of rest takes on important dimensions from resting on the Sabbath to our eternal rest. God promised the Israelites that they were going to find their rest in the Promised Land. The Promised Land became a metaphor of a perfect state of wholeness; prosperity of body, mind, and spirit. The Epistle to the Hebrews uses that metaphor for eternity. It says "God has reserved a rest for the people of God" in our eternal home.

The Bible is big on rest. The concept and metaphor is a rich one. It has to do with celebration more than with days off. God created the world and then God had a day of rest, but what did he do? He stood back and looked at his creation and said, "Wow! This is really great." That is why later on

God promised to bring the children of Israel into the Promised Land. It was to be the land flowing with milk and honey, the land of abundant life. So we get this connection between God's "Wow!" about the grandeur and beauty of creation in its fullness and completeness, and the promise of life that is full and complete - Shalom. That is abundant life in the Promised Land. So it's a natural step to think of going home to be with the Lord as the achievement of the rest God has reserved for all humankind. That is our opportunity to stand back and say, "Wow!" about the richness with which God fills our lives and the ultimate blessings to which he brings us in our heavenly future.

God apparently has an unusual notion about rest as celebration. So Jesus says, "Come unto me all you who labor and who are heavy laden and I will give you rest ... for I have come that you may have life and that you may have it abundantly." Jesus knew what he was talking about when he referred to "all who labor". The Bible makes plain to us that everybody who knew Jesus in Nazareth, Capernaum, and Bethsaida knew that he was the carpenter's son. They identified him as belonging to the carpenter's family and therefore belonging to the carpenter's or building contractor's trade. They knew him as a laborer.

Joseph was probably more than just a carpenter. He was probably a building contractor. During Jesus' adolescence and young adult years the Romans were building a new city near Nazareth called Sephoris. Recently that Roman city has been excavated. It was a grand city and surely any building contractor or carpenter or tradesmen in Galilee, particularly in the area of Nazareth would have been engaged in this enormous public works project. So when Jesus said, "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden…", surely he knew what he was talking about. He was not just making up theoretical propositions. He was referring to concrete people, concrete experiences, and the ardors of concrete daily life in what John Kennedy called "this tragic adventure of human existence".

Jesus was the son of a wealthy building contractor. Paul specifically says that, "…he was rich and by an intentional decision he made himself poor on our behalf that we might become rich toward God." Jesus was apparently a successful contractor who one day decided to give it all up to find his true vocation as an itinerant preacher.

The rich Jesus became poor so that the poor in spirit might become rich toward God. There is a strong notion in the church that God has a preferential option for the poor. That is a romantic idea. There is no evidence in the scripture that God has that kind of orientation. In fact, Jesus trivializes the poor, by saying, "The poor you will always have around. There is no fixing that issue. Do not be preoccupied with them.

You can give them charity whenever you get around to it. Stay focused on the things that count."

Jesus was sitting in a rich man's house one day and had not washed his feet. So a lady friend of his came by with an expensive box of ointment or perfume. Some people say she made her wealth by prostitution. She poured all that expensive perfume over Jesus' feet. Judas said, "That is a dirty shame. She could have sold the alabaster box and the ointment for a great deal of money. She could have given it to the poor." Jesus said, "You can always give something to the poor. Right now the right thing to do is what the woman has done!"

This is the time to spend riches in a rich man's house on a person who knows how to appreciate richness. No preferential option for the poor here. Well, how do you put all of that together with the other side of that concern in the Bible? Of course we should be concerned about the poor. God is for richness. In the biblical narrative God made us for Eden. God promised us the abundant life. Metaphorically God guarantees us in the end the gold-plated city, paved with blocks of gold. Can you beat that?

God is for the rich. God is also for the not so rich, the middle class. God is for guys like me and God is for those that are a little poorer than I am. It is not biblical to say that God has a special preference for the poor. God has a special preferential option for everybody. I know a fellow who is a billionaire. He is one of the loneliest people I know. That is probably why he seeks me out and keeps me as a friend. He does not know very much about relationships. I have to do most of the work in the relationship. He lost his family because he was so busy making a billion dollars. I think God is as much for him, the up and out, I call him, as God is for the down and out, the woman who is picking garbage to keep alive and support her drug habit.

I know that God is for her. I think God is also for him. Do you think God makes a distinction between the down and out and the up and out? There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that. That is why when Jesus said, "Come unto me *all you* that labor and are badly burdened and I will give you Shalom," he did not lay down any kind of specialized restrictions. Jesus did not say, "All you who labor as blue collar workers or all you who labor under the poverty level or at the minimum wage…." He did not say, "All you who labor as building contractors…, or white collar workers." Neither did he say, "All you who belong to the union…, or do not belong to the union…, all you who have medical coverage or a good benefit package…." Jesus did not say, "All you who don't have that." No particular distinction is made there. "Come unto me all ...." God is for us all.

In our heart of hearts we always know that but how easily we slide around it and into our strange rationalizations. How easily the media sloganeering and political harangues distract us from this truth. God has a preferential option for every person who is trying one way or another to labor with the ardors of our journey, make sense out of it, and come to a meaningful, integrated embrace of real life.

"I have come that you may have life and that you may have it more richly," Jesus said. So "come unto me, the paradigm for meaningfulness, wholeness, and abundant life." Jesus would have used a special term if you were to ask him what he meant. What do you mean by abundant life, Jesus? What do you mean, "Come onto me all ye that labor and I will give you rest…." Do you mean it in the sense that God stood back on the seventh day and said, "Wow!" What do you mean by rest in the Promised Land, in the abundant life -Shalom ? What is that rest for the people of God that you promised us?

Last night I got a call from a Funeral Home. Tomorrow I must bury a person that I met in a nursing home while visiting a parishioner. What I am going to say is, "God has reserved a rest for his people." My text is going to be that passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews. What shall I tell them Jesus would have said if they asked him, "What do you mean by a rest, abundant life, the Promised Land?" Jesus' word for it was *Shalom*. *Shalom* is a lovely Hebrew word. It is also a lovely Arabic word as well, "*Salam*". *Shalom* means to be rich, to prosper robustly in body, mind, and spirit. It implies being rich with every kind of health, wholeness, sense of abundance and fullness of life that God makes possible. God intended us all for an Eden-like tranquility and prosperity.

"Come unto me all you that Labor and are heavy laden. I will give you the Promised Land of peace and prosperity that flourishes in the soul that is secure in God's grace. It is the heritage of every person who is deeply aware that divine grace is unconditional and universal, and will embrace everyone in heavenly *Shalom*. I have come that you may have *Shalom*; that you may have every bit of God's *Shalom*."

Amen. So Let it Be!

SERMON FIFTEEN

CELEBRATING GOD:
II SAMUEL 6:1-5, 12B-19, PSALM 24, EPHESIANS 1:3-14 (14C)

To the Praise of God's Glory

Yesterday I had the unusual experience of attending seven different celebrations. It struck me during that interesting day of variety and pleasure that life is designed for celebration. People who operate regularly with optimism and joy are clearly healthy folks and we recognize that immediately when we meet them. When we encounter persons who are filled with pessimism and depressive perspectives on life, we rather spontaneously sense some real pathology there. They just do not seem able to celebrate anything. The reason it seems so obvious to us that such a mood is sick lies in the fact that all emotionally and spiritually healthy people know intuitively that life is beautiful, even in its tough times, and celebration is the most relevant way of savoring the flavor of this great gift God has given us.

This should not surprise us. If the mythic story of the Garden of Eden speaks in any way at all about the real nature and destiny of human existence, it surely speaks of life as a perpetual celebration. It sets a tone for the human story as having a delectable flavor. We can enjoy our very existence and the intriguing process of growing ourselves. We are invited to the pleasure of admiring others. Every day can be a season to savor the flavor of relating to God. The obvious evidence suggests that life is not mainly about work but about celebration. God made humans for celebration so we could celebrate God as God is present to us in our palpable experience of the created world and the Divine Spirit.

It is undoubtedly true that the main reason why the Hebrew faith tradition, eventually expressed in the forms of Christianity, triumphed over all other movements in the ancient world lay in the fact that it was the only religious tradition that *celebrated* God. All other religions perceived God as a threat, and were designed to placate God. Of course there is plenty of

pagan fear of God as the Warrior and vengeful threat in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. Even Judaism and Christianity often devolved into pagan notions of God as dangerous. However, it is clear that the mainstream of the Bible stories is about God as the God of unconditional and universal grace. God's grace is so radical that God intends to embrace every living human being in it and by it redeem and heal the whole of the created world.

Any ambivalence about God in the Old Testament message does not eclipse that mainstream of unconditional forgiveness theology. The surprise of the entire Bible, as compared with all the religious documents of world history, is its unconditional *affirmation* of us as humans before the face of God. God affirms us just as and where we are in our pilgrimage at any given moment. God is delighted that we are just there, just now. God sees the potential for growth and a future that can be for us. Every human soul who gets that point recognizes immediately that God's grace is our only chance for a meaningful life. It is the only durable source of joy and celebration and our only sure hope for time and eternity. Surely it is the urgency of this exciting fact that prompted both Paul and John to tell the story of Jesus in such a way as to mediate a celebrative renewal of the old Hebrew tradition. All of us who know their narratives readily realize that it is this story that sounds just right for the personal needs of every human being. That story about our God who can be celebrated, touches our spirits with a sense of the Divine Spirit.

Humans intuitively know that life is about celebration. We intuitively know that a threatening God just does not make sense, cannot be, and would be a monster unworthy of human celebration or worship. There was a moment in ancient Egyptian history when a glimpse of this divine grace seems to have broken through to the Pharaoh. As he anticipated his death he wrote a poetic prayer on the wall of his tomb. It is very much like one of our biblical Psalms. In it the Pharaoh prayed, "O God, if it be possible, deal with me not according to the record of my life but according to your mercy and goodwill toward your servant."

This morning we read three extended scriptures. All of them are about celebrations. We read the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant up from the house of Obed Edom to place it in the tabernacle in Jerusalem with joy and celebration. We read Psalm 24 which was the special liturgy and chant written by David for the crowd to sing while their procession made its way up the mountain to the Jerusalem acropolis. We finished our contemplation of scripture with the passage from Paul in which he describes our salvation as provided to us by God for "the praise of God's

glory." God created us for celebration so that we can celebrate ourselves and God, thus inducing God to celebrate all the more.

I said that human life is designed for celebration and not first of all for work. Of course, there was work to be done already in the Garden of Eden. Adam was required to name the animals, find a spouse, and tend the garden. Work is necessary to provide the basics which make celebration possible. However, work should be the source of livelihood which creates the setting for celebrative life. Life is for celebration of our work, of our life outside of work, and of the central aspect of our lives, i.e., our life with God.

Thus it is appropriate that we make worship the center of our lives. In private and communal worship we learn to celebrate God, our world, and the meaning and continuity of our lives. We celebrate the continuity of our lives with God and our lives with each other. Indeed, what a rich heritage of celebration the life of the church, the believing and celebrating community, has produced in art, architecture, literature, and music! Only Christianity has produced such a rich corpus of religious music. It is not incidental that in our celebrative life as a worshipping community we sing a great number of fine hymns of praise to God for creation, providence, and enriching grace. It is neither accidental nor incidental. It is absolutely central and inevitable that we should do so. It is expressive of our nature as humans.

That kind of musical celebration draws up from deep inside us the most important energies and excitement in life. It gives expression and release to our inherent longing and need to rejoice, enjoy, give thanks, praise, and celebrate God. David saw that 3000 years ago and gave us the soulful hymn of Psalm 103.

Oh Come, my soul, bless thou the Lord thy maker
And all within me bless God's holy name.
Bless thou the Lord, forget not all God's mercies,
God's pardoning grace, God's saving love proclaim!

There is a hymn that can keep the believer on the celebrative edge of his or her seat all week. Take it with you in your work and in your celebrative leisure. You will be surprised how it will season the flavor of your life.

Amen. So let it Be.

SERMON SIXTEEN

BETWEEN HISTORY AND HOPE:
II CORINTHIANS 5:17-20, LUKE 2:1-18

In Jesus Christ God was reconciling the world unto God's self.
If you are in Christ you are a new kind of person ...reconciled to God,
You are an ambassador for Christ, inviting everyone to be reconciled to God.

This sermon is for children - children of all ages. My theme is "Between Hope and History". That sounds like an adult title, doesn't it? Let me tell you what it means. God came to visit us in the baby Jesus. God wanted to change the world, to make it better. God got pretty sick of it being as bad as it was and God decided that rather then expecting everybody else to change it, God would change it and so God did. God did it in a very special way. God came in Jesus to reconcile the world to God's self. Now that is a lot big words, adult words, but it really means a simple thing that children can understand.

It means that God came not to spank the world but to love the world. God didn't come to yell at the world and all of us. God came to put God's divine arms around us instead. Really it all worked out a bit simpler than that. God came as a baby in a manger and that baby grew up and became an interesting adolescent and then he became an adult man, Jesus. So what it all came down to was this that God decided to fix the world, make it a good place, by coming to visit us as *one responsible man*.

That was all it took. One responsible man! God came in the person of Jesus to be *one responsible man.* One man who was willing to live his life doing life the right way! That is all it takes to change the world. It just takes one of us to decide to do it the right way. Just like Jesus did, that is, with the same spirit inside of us as Jesus showed he had inside of him. That would be God's spirit.

So it just takes one man or woman who is God's kind of woman or man to fix the whole world. Now the world isn't fixed yet, of course. That is why the Bible says that God *was* in Christ reconciling the world unto God's self. Christ keeps coming to us in Jesus' story from the Bible. So you can see that God *is* in Christ reconciling the world unto God's self.

God keeps on coming to us in the spirit of Christ and keeps on telling us the story of Jesus. God keeps on reconciling the world unto God's self.

That is a good thing because all of us start out in life new, don't we? All of you children started out in life new and you will grow up. You can grow up good or you can grow up bad. You can grow up as Jesus' kind of person or you can grow up as something else. You can grow up being part of the responsible world or you can grow up irresponsibly. That is, you can be part of the problem, or you can be part of what fixes the problem, depending on how you decide you want to grow up.

If you grow up in the spirit of Jesus you can help fix the problems of the world. The problem of the world is that there are a lot of people who do wrong, there are a lot of people who are very sad, and there are a lot of people who suffer all the time and have a terrible time of life. Nothing can help them unless we help them. Nothing can teach them that God loves them unless we teach them. Nothing can help them realize that they are forgiven unless we forgive them. St. Paul says it was when we were all still sinners that Jesus came to tell us that God does not hate us because we are sinners but that God loves us because God wants us to be forgiven sinners.

So that is God's story. That is why every time God speaks to us, the first thing God always says in the Bible is, "Fear not." Never be afraid. Never be afraid of anything. Jesus came as one responsible man to tell us all never to be afraid. Do not be afraid of what you feel guilty about. Don't be afraid of what you are ashamed of. Don't be afraid of what you are afraid of. Fear not because whether you're guilty or shameful or fearful, God says, "That doesn't count. What counts is I love you anyway and I forgive you." The Bible story is about God forgiving all of us and it is about one responsible man walking around in the world telling us that story long enough that we can all feel so forgiven by God that we are not afraid of what we're guilty of, afraid of, or ashamed of.

That is important because if you are feeling guilty or ashamed, or if you're feeling fearful all the time, that eats up all of your spirit inside and then you have no spirit left to grow into God's kind of person, and you have no spirit left to be joyful. Then you have no spirit left to praise God. So God doesn't want that kind of foolishness going on. God just says that it doesn't count anymore. "I ruled it out," God says "No more fear, no more guilt, no more shame. The only thing that counts is that I forgive you. I love you, so be joyful."

So that is why I said this sermon is about being between hope and history. That is, life is all of the time like we are on a string between our past, in which we did wrong, and our hope for the future, in which we can

be God's one responsible woman or God's one responsible man. Everybody has to go through that. All of you children will grow up, whether you like it or not. It's automatic. When you grow up you have to find something to do with your life. What are you going to do with you life? What kind of job are you going to get? What are you going to be?

Well, what would you like to be? Would you rather race cars or would you rather preach? You are going to grow up and you are going to do something with your life. You are free to choose. You are going to make a good life for yourself. When you grow up and you decide that what you want to do most of all in life is to make refrigerators, that is a good idea. In fact, you can start where us old people finished making refrigerators. Actually we made some pretty good refrigerators. But you can start there. You can be an engineer or an assembly line worker and you can make better refrigerators. You can start right where we left off and make better ones. Maybe you like to make cars. Well, we made some pretty good cars. Now when you grow up you can look at all those cars and you can make better cars. You can start right where we stopped and go from there and build better ones.

However, in this business of being a good person you can't start where we left off. Maybe all the adults in this church are wonderful, responsible people. They do things right. They believe in God. They are fine Christian people. You can't stand on our shoulders and leap from there to greater and greater spirituality, or faith, or goodness. You have to start over at the beginning in all those things that count for the kind of person you will become. That's a big problem for the human race. Every new baby that is born has to start over from the beginning. You are all going to grow up, but how are you going to grow up? You have the same problem that we had. When I was born 80 years ago, I had big problem. How was I going to grow up? You have to start the same place I did. You can never stand on my shoulders and reach further and leap farther. On all the things that really count, except for cars and refrigerators, you must start over at the beginning.

That is why it is so important that we have Jesus' story. That is why it is so important to realize that we are suspended here between our past where we made mistakes and our future where God holds out for us the hope that no matter what we did wrong in the past we can do good in the future. We know we are forgiven for the past and that God loves us for the future. That is what Christmas is about, you see. One responsible man came as a baby in the manger to make that very plain to us. So we need to pay attention to that one responsible man and see whether it makes sense for you and me to be that next responsible woman or man.

Let me read you a little bit of a story about that one responsible man, Jesus. There is a surprising little story about him. It goes like this: He was born in a village few people ever heard of. He was the child of a very poor woman. He grew up in another village that really didn't amount to anything. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30 years old. Then for three years he decided he wanted to be a preacher but he didn't have any church. He just wandered around the country side. He preached whenever any body gathered around and would listen to him. He never wrote a book. He never was in the government. He never was an elder in the church. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn't go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled as far as across this state. He did none of the things that everyone these days says you have to do in order to be a great person. He had nothing to say about himself that would impress anybody. If he had applied for a job today he wouldn't get it, he had no decent resume.

He was only 30 when things started to go bad for him. People started to hate him and the crowds started to go against him. Then his friends became afraid and ran away. His enemies captured him and condemned him. They nailed him to a cross with thieves that were being killed for their crimes. While he was dying the people who killed him were trying to steal his clothes, the only thing he owned on earth. When he was dead, there was no place to put his body. He didn't have a cemetery plot. So they put him in someone else's grave, because a friend pitied him. Now it is 2,000 years later and today he is the most important person of the human race, the most important person ever born, and the leader of everything that happens that is good in the whole world. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the congresses that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not effected the life of all of us on earth so much as that one solitary, responsible guy from Nazareth. He changed the world by being one responsible person

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON SEVENTEEN

"WHY I BELIEVE IN GOD": MATTHEW 6: 25-33

"Consider the lilies" Mt 6:28

Jesus said, "Consider the lilies of the field how they grow. They toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." The theme this morning is, "Why I believe in God." You might well have thought I would have addressed this topic at the beginning of my ministry rather than at the end. The reason that I address it now instead of at the beginning can be explained by a simple story. A young seminary student, preaching one of his first sermons, selected the passage from the Lord's Prayer, which says, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". His intention was to develop an elaborate theology of forgiveness. A very good idea! He preached vigorously, valiantly, articulately and long. When he was departing the sanctuary after worship, an elderly lady took his hand and said to him, "Young man, you have not lived long enough to have sinned well enough to have been forgiven thoroughly enough to know what you are talking about."

One has to earn the right to speak on certain topics. Perhaps after sixty years of ministry I have earned the right to address this profound issue of why I believe in God. It has everything to do with that text, "Consider the lilies." It is not an easy or simple task to speak on this subject because the truth is that, at the very best, God is uncommonly subtle. God does not make God's self boldly and obviously known to us. We can know God, and therefore have a ground and foundation for believing in God, only if after years of seasoning we have developed the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

There are, in my judgment, only five reasons why a person ought to believe in God. I hope you will not be offended by the fact that I believe all five of these reasons do not primarily have to do with Jesus Christ. I will explain that at the end of my sermon. There are only five reasons, I think, why a person can and ought to believe in God. The first one is the *mindfulness of creation*. I have been struck profoundly, during all the long

years of my education, reading, thinking, and reflecting, by the amazing fact of the orderliness and design of this marvelous created world. The deeper one looks into the majesty of the creation the more profound the intricacies of the order of it seem to be. I recently read a marvelous book on epigenetics that describes the marvelous intricacies of how cells in our body know whether to turn themselves into skin cells or manufacture other organs, or create red blood cells in bone marrow.

Of course, for a century and a half, and in some ways much longer than that, the prevailing opinion in the world of science has been that all this came somehow by accident. The truth is that this wonderful world in which we live and of which we are a majestic part reflects the design of an ingenious and creative mind. The notion that the universes came about by accident surely is the most laughable of all possible hypotheses. That is to say, if one had no personal sense of God and no driving motivation to seek out God and were simply interested in a very secular quest into the nature and structure or the design and order of this material world, one would, none the less, be compelled in the end by sheer honesty to invent a notion of a grand creator behind this grand creation. One would need to perceive a majestic and intentional mind behind this mindful creation.

Some years ago a significant scientist developed the idea that the further you look into creation the more you discover chaos and entropy. Out of that came, in astronomy and physics, a whole new way of thinking about things, that was called “chaos theory”. I predicted 30 years ago that behind what seemed to us to be chaos would soon surface a new level of integrated order. We had crossed over a new boundary of insight, experience, and data in physics and astrophysics in the last half of the 20th century. We had not, however, developed a good model for managing that new data. So things looked chaotic. That sense of chaos has now raised itself to a new sense of order because we have discovered the scientific models that account for that larger, deeper view of reality in God’s creation. I recently read Eric Schroedinger's 1917 volume entitled, *What is Life*. He predicted that every breakthrough would look like chaos until we developed the models to see the new order in the data. It seems to me that the better a student and the more erudite a scientist one is the more one is driven to a profound sense of awareness of and faith in the great God of this created universe.

However, it is not just the order of creation that compels us to believe. If that were all we had we would already have a lot of evidence that would compel us to God. But we might set that on the shelf and say, “Well that is one theory, one hypothesis. When we really get to know everything about everything we will probably have a completely different perspective.” The

truth is that this compelling evidence of the mindfulness of creation is reinforced in any thoughtful person by a careful look at the *benevolence of God's providence* in life and in history. "Consider the lilies of the field," Jesus said. Consider them. Not just with regard to this majestic mindfulness of creation, this wonderful orderliness by which they repeat, generation after generation, their wonderfully genetic reproduction. Consider the benevolence of providence that sustains and orders their processes and ours through history. When I look back on my life of 80 years, I can tell you with confessional honesty and with great appreciation that those things in my life which I thought were the very important issues that I would have pushed and shoved into place with might and main if I could have, proved to be virtually irrelevant to the nature and meaning of my life and my unfolding destiny.

Those things, on the other hand, which I thought were the tragic moments that God, if God had any brains at all, would have prevented from happening to me, have become the hinges of my destiny. For that kind of unfolding insight to come out of the complexities of human existence and the dangers of unfolding human life, cannot be an accident. God's providence is a careful, mindful, growth-oriented shepherding of our lives and of history.

Some people look at history and focus on the tragic moments and can only see the tragedy. They never can get beyond that. They seem not to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear the deeper meaning of it and discern the outcome and the fruitfulness of our pain. But with those eyes to see and ears to hear it is not difficult in retrospect to see the careful, kindly shepherding of God's benevolent providence in our lives.

During the Revolutionary War when things were going badly and the Continental Congress was trying to hammer out a constitution for this budding United States, a Virginian statesman named John Paige wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson. He said this, "Thomas, we know that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, and do you not think that an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs the storm?" Thomas Jefferson responded with a profound confession of faith, I suppose you might call it, acknowledging the undergirding guidance of God's providence that made possible the unfolding of the founding moments of our nation.

The third reason I believe in God is the *inescapable evidence of the aesthetic urge in everything* in God's universe. Given half a chance, unobstructed by human intervention, everything in God's world seems to me always to be moving toward beauty. For whose eyes is the Edelweiss that blossoms in a snowy crevice at 14,000 feet? Who delights in that?

Who celebrates the color, the texture, the delicacy, the beauty? Is beauty in this world created only for our eyes and our ears? Who sees that exquisite explosion of the most delicate kind of art? What about the billions of sunsets everyday on all the uncountable planets in the whole panoply of universes? Who sees that and sings poetry because of it? For God's eyes! Not for God's eyes only, but at least first of all for God's eyes. That is why Jesus said, "Consider the lilies, Solomon in all his glory had nothing on them. He was not arrayed like one of these."

As I got onto the expressway this morning I noticed suddenly something I had never noticed before. There in the unfinished land between the entrance ramp and the highway, there has sprung up an incredible array of magnificent wildflowers. I would imagine there were probably a hundred varieties just bursting into bloom. Leave things alone for a little while and they burst into beauty. Why not ugliness, why not bareness? Why is everything in this world so irrepressibly vital, so full of life? Why is life so full of beauty? Is this accident or is there some grand soul that sits above this cosmic circle and celebrates? Celebrates the flowers in the abandoned land! I like a God like that. How could I not believe in a God like that?

The fourth reason that I believe in God is the *healing kindness of God's unconditional acceptance of us*. Say that it is only a notion that sprung up in some human head. Say there is no divine magic behind that revelation. Say it is simply an idea we came into out of our pain. What we know is that God is a God who is not a threat as people used to think but instead reaches out to us in unconditional forgiving grace. The gospel message makes plain that God has for us the kind of unconditional positive regard that Carl Rogers, the famed psychologist, said is the one indispensible requirement for healing human flaws. Of course, that is not just a human idea. It is a divine truth. No human can imagine the radical nature and scope of divine grace.

The capacity of the human mind to imagine that quality of divine grace to us, in spite of ourselves, would be an astonishing miracle of imagination if it were not divine revelation. We are structured by fear and guilt and shame. Left to ourselves we tend to decay into a mass of negativism. The capacity of the human soul to comprehend, out of the woundedness and tragedy of our humanness, the notion of unconditional forgiveness is superhuman. *Grace is a divine thing*.

It is not possible for us to imagine this unless there is that grand analogy of forgiveness that teases out of our hearts and minds the sense that we have been embraced. That notion of grace is tailored to our hearts main hurt. It reaches around all our defenses, outflanks all our fear and

guilt and shame, and touches us at the center of our main problem. It neutralizes all the fear, guilt and shame we may project into our relationship with God. It takes it away. God has eternally erased it from the equation of our relationship with God. That notion of grace makes it possible for us to accept our past with humble relief and consolation, and leave it with God who cancels its dangerousness with forgiveness all around.

God frees us to accept our future. Grace as total forgiveness for everybody makes it possible to accept our future with confidence and hope. Thus it may be a useable future in spite of whatever the anguish of our past. Grace makes it possible for us, therefore, to accept the present with joyful responsibility and with a sense of our own human limitations. God intends us to have a lively sense of humor about the entire matter of our failure and God's forgiveness. For God it is simply the comedy of redemption that we cannot sin ourselves out of God's grace and we cannot squirm out of God's long embrace. I believe in God because grace is so relevant that if it had not been revealed to us in the scripture we would have had to invent it to survive. God is the source and guarantor of our assurance and experience that love works and grace heals.

That leads me to the fifth reason to believe in God. It seems to me that when you take the perspective I have developed thus far and you look at history, your own history and the texture of life as it unfolds, there seems to be, in the middle of it all subtle but sturdy evidence that what is really going on here is that *God is constantly insinuating God's self into human experience*. God is continually incarnating God's self in human persons and the human process. You could say that the whole of history is the enterprise of incarnation. God is always busy clothing God's self as it were in the flesh of our lives, subtly but surely revealing God's self in our sense of things and our sense of God.

God's presence to and with us is subtle but profound. It is not just that Jesus is the incarnation of God. It is that the whole enterprise of history is God insinuated into the processes, the evidences, the data, and the experiences of this material world. God is present everywhere, always in everything for those who have the eyes to see and ears to hear. God is always personifying God's grand and subtle nature in human flesh, in human experience, in human perception. Think for a moment about all the personages of note throughout history in whom it was quite clear that God was present to us, shaping history and broadening God's reign in this world. Each of those persons in whom we can see a burst of the spirit of Pentecost was a special incarnation of God present with and for us.

There are the five reasons why I believe in God. None of them is primarily Jesus Christ. How come? Because the reason to believe in Jesus Christ is because these five things compel one to believe in God. I do not believe in God because I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in Jesus Christ because these five evidences compel me to believe in God and I can see a major burst of the Divine Spirit in that man from Nazareth who changed history. It is clear that God's enterprise is always incarnation. It is easy, therefore, to understand that in Jesus the full thrust of the presence and incarnation of God's spirit is evident to us. Paul's says that the whole of the Godhead is evident in the flesh in that one man. Think again about the angel in the whirlwind. I was very pleased when our recent president, in his second inaugural address, said this "Never tiring, never yielding, never finishing, we renew that purpose of John Paige and Thomas Jefferson today to make our country more just and more generous ... The work continues, the story goes on and I believe an angel still rides in the whirlwind. An angel still directs the storm." That makes sense to me. I believe in God. How can one ever not believe in God?

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON EIGHTEEN

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?: ROMANS 12:2

Discern what is the will of God: the good, the acceptable, the perfect.

What difference does it make? "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may discern what is the will of God, namely, what is good, acceptable, and perfect." Why? What difference does it make?

Some years ago, I became acquainted with a black pastor and his congregation in Detroit. We became close friends and he invited me frequently to his congregation to do workshops or to teach courses and occasionally to preach to the congregation. His congregation was totally African American. When I went there the first time he said to me, "This may be a little unusual and maybe even uncomfortable for you. My whole congregation is black," but he said, "Don't worry. I know you very well and when we all get to heaven you'll be black just like all the rest of us." Later when he introduced me to his congregation he gave my biography and then he said, "It's unusual for us to have a white preacher in our black congregation but don't worry. I know him well. He is really black-hearted."

Joe, my friend, was not only a humorist but he also knew what transformation meant. He knew what Paul's words in this passage stand for. "Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." This passage has always been rather startling to me. When you consider Paul, a man who was radically and suddenly converted by a deep inner change, you can understand that he would talk about transformation. In one incredible day in his life he had been transformed from an enemy of the Christian movement into *the* most productive spokesman for Christ. It is easy to understand why he would talk about transformation and why he would think of it as being at the core of the Christian experience.

What always surprises me about this passage, however, is that he talks about transformation as an action that takes place in the mind. We would

have expected him to talk about it as a business that is accomplished in the heart. "Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." I want to ask you today, What difference does it make to change your mind? What does Paul have in mind that he should look for such radical change as he suggests here, by a change of mind? Why does he not focus instead on a change of heart?

Recently we celebrated the Protestant festival of Reformation Sunday. I like to think of this phase of the church's life as the Reformation phase of the church's life, from the end of October until Thanksgiving Day and the anticipation of the beginning of Advent a week later. Reformation time! I like to think of it as a time when we increase our consciousness regarding what reformation meant as that great church revolution in the 16th century. I also like to think we could continue to raise our consciousness level by a greater and sustained sense of transformation if we celebrated Reformation Sunday more obviously. Martin Luther and John Calvin set in motion a transformation for which Reformation Day stands.

The transformation of Martin Luther himself was a remarkable personal event in history. Martin Luther struggled all of his childhood, youth, and young adult life with a terrible sense of guilt and anxiety. He was terrified about the threat that the medieval notions about God posed for him. Luther tried to live his life perfectly before the face of God, but was sure he always fell short. The change in Martin Luther's life was a change from the sense of God as threat to the sense of God as friend. He came to see God as the enticer. That sense of God was the source of immense and profound consolation for Luther. It was such incredible consolation that Luther could say, "Sin boldly, you know you are going to be a sinner anyway. Every time you get up in the morning you know it's going to be a day in which you are going to be a sinner so go right out there and sin boldly knowing that God is a God of radical and unconditional grace." Martin Luther's transformation came through the mind and thence through the heart.

His transformation was first of all an experience of being a transformed mind. Luther came to that transformation by a highly motivated, profoundly industrious study of the word of God. It was because he encountered the facts, the information, the data on the pages of a Bible, that the gripping message of Ephesians and Romans came through to his mind: "By grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast." So then it was because his mind was transformed by data that his heart was changed. The intellectual light dawned on him and his inner world of the heart was illumined and changed.

I do not know if that is always the case in every human being, but I remember that in the Middle Ages Catholic piety was generally described as the process of cultivating the presence of God. There was a conscience effort among some Medieval Christians, to be very serious about the business of their relationship with God, rather than just about the formalities of the church. Pious Christians had a disposition, perspective, and ambition to cultivate a sense of the presence of God. They longed for that to be so real in their lives that their minds would be filled with that sense of God's presence. They wanted to be filled with the message of God's grace. They thought that if they had a mind full of God it would seep down into their inner core and change their sense of what life meant.

My friend Joe knew that transformation may begin in the mind but it isn't finished until it has changed one's heart. What difference does it make to be a Reformation Christian? What does it mean not to be conformed to the spirit of this age but to be transformed in one's mind? If our minds are filled with the fluff of our American culture today we become utterly superficial people with trivial values. Filled with the facts that one gets from living profoundly with and from the word of God, however, makes us deep characters with substantial values.

Nothing ever happens in a church that's more vital to the church's life and to the health of the congregation than solid investment of one's time and energy in studying the message of the Word. We all need that kind of mental wrestling with the data in scripture. It is clear that what Paul implies here and what the scripture's message is throughout, is that if we fill our minds and thoughts with the data of God's truth eventually our minds leap beyond the data to the experience of faith. We grow from the facts to the intuitions of faith. Our learning leads to the meaningful moment when our hearts embrace and are embraced by the truth. Then our value system is corrected. Our life compass is oriented upon the Polaris of God's presence. Then God can pour God's self into our well prepared and informed persons.

Until the day of Martin Luther and the great reformation, the church in the Western World was more a church of formalism than of depth and heartiness. It is not accidental, that when the Reformers began to write the catechisms for the Protestant movement The Westminster Confessions started out with the question, "What is the chief purpose or end of human existence?" The answer is intellectually profound: "To *know* God and to enjoy God forever." Another of those Reformation statements of faith is the Heidelberg Catechism. It begins with a slightly different question. "What must I know to live and die happily? I must *know* how great my sins and miseries are, how I have been delivered from my sins and

miseries, and how I may live a life of gratitude in *knowing* that I am not my own but I belong to my faithful savior."

It's interesting that both of those Catechisms begin where Paul begins – in the mind. "To *know* God and enjoy him forever." "What must I *know* to live and die happily?" Yet the answer to both of the Catechism questions lands us not just in the mind, but in the heart; at the center of ourselves, in the core of our hearts. The Reformers wanted to bring us back from preoccupation with a formalistic church to the pages of the word. *Sola Scriptura*, they said. Only Scripture is the authority for our faith. They wanted to emphasize that the transformation of Christian minds comes by filling those minds with God's information so that the net result can be the event that moves beyond the mind to the heart.

Before the Reformation the church was losing its grip on genuine appreciation of the presence of God in personal experience. Martin Luther found that there was no hope or consolation for him in the message and experience of the church. It offered no hope or consolation for a priest who had given all his life to the quest for a way to settle his anxiety. He wanted and needed a kind of spirituality that would pour into him the experience of God's grace toward him. What happened to him as a consequence happened to the world. Martin Luther's change brought a change to the world: a shift from formal, institutional Christianity to profound personal spirituality. Personal spirituality and the church's responsibility in society go together. If we do not have a transformation of the mind and heart deepening personal spirituality, there can be no effective church work or witness to our society that will bring redemptive cultural change.

Martin Luther set in motion a series of shifts. He moved the church from theology filled with Greek thought or philosophical speculation to biblical faith and trust. He reformed the church from preoccupation with a kind of magical mysterious world to a tractable world, a world that could be studied and understood. The Reformation brought a new view of the universe as operating with identifiable causes and affects. Luther and Calvin moved the world from an abstract rationalism to a scientific empiricism. It was Protestantism that made science possible. It's an interesting thing that the transformation of Martin Luther's mind, which produced this profound personal spirituality in his heart made a scientific view of the world possible.

What difference does it make? It makes all the difference in the world if from a preoccupation with civil religion or ecclesiastical formalism we are shifted to the Bible as the well- spring of that truth that changes minds and hearts. Today in our world we are facing three serious obstacles to the

free flow of personal spirituality. One thing is the radical bastardization of true spirituality by Fundamentalism and its evils.

Fundamentalism is an evil pagan religion. It has more power to seduce people away from the transformation of the gospel and the saving power of God's grace than any other force. In that regard, it is much more dangerous and damaging than is, for example, the philosophy of humanism. A second thing that we are up against in our world today is the opposite of that, namely, constantly having our minds packed full of the triviality of our current culture. It is not just the fact that there is so much in our culture today that is highly questionable morally and ethically. That is bad enough but what is really corrupting is the superficiality of popular American culture. It's not surprising that the Arab World wants to protect itself from trivialization by Western ideology. The third danger is the rank secularism flooding the Western world today.

One of the ways in which that comes to ground in policy problems is for example the ridiculous debate we constantly have about the separation of church and state. The separation of church and state is not only a good idea, it is an essential idea. However, the separation of church and state as it was set forth in the Constitution of the United States had nothing whatsoever to do with the debate that's going on in Congress and in our culture today about that issue. Today the notions that are afloat in our country about that issue are all running in the direction of the idea that somehow or another the constitutional guarantee means that there can never be any connection between politics and God. If you read the Constitution you realize immediately that nothing is further from the truth set forth there than that completely corrupt idea. It is not the case that what the Constitution warranties for us is a disconnect between politics and God. What the Constitution guaranties is that United States Government will never officially sanction any specific religion or denomination as the State religion. That is the only thing that the Constitution intends and guaranties regarding separation of church and state.

That is why there are two causes that continually need to be set before us from the Constitution. The first is the "disestablishment clause" as I just described it: the Government may make no religion the official religion. The second is the free exercise clause: the right of every American to be free to access the spiritual quest and religious institution that he or she chooses as the way for him or her to achieve a transformation of the mind and a renewal of the heart and the spirit. There is not an intention in the Constitution to create an unbridgeable chasm between God and our public life. It is time that Christians see to it that the transformation of the mind

of America, which clarifies that once again, takes place so that the heart of America may be reached for wholesome and genuine spirituality.

What difference does it make if are minds are transformed and our hearts are renewed? It makes very practical difference. Let me give you a concrete example from history. The line from Martin Luther in 1517 to Martin Luther King in our lifetime is a direct line. Martin Luther King could not have happened if it had not been for the great transformation of the 16th century Reformation. Martin Luther King is a significant American hero. He came from meager roots. He was personally tireless in his crusade of compassion and passion. He lived the vision of his dream. I am not going to glorify him beyond his own true glory. God can do that. He was a human, he was flawed, but he changed our nation redemptively and he gave his life for it. That's the difference that it makes to have a transformed mind that engages the heart to renewal.

Protestant churches need to recover the consciousness of our Reformation tradition. It is crucial to know what it means to share the legacy of that redemptive tradition. Who today understands that it is that tradition that restored profound spirituality to the church, made civil rights possible, made racial integration possible, and made it possible that in our history we have an irrepressible force for honest freedom and democracy? We have this gift to offer the nations of the world: authentic justice, human decency, and genuine spirituality. It is a tradition which has awakened us to the consolations of God's grace. Our ministry is to carry God's radical, unconditional, and universal grace to our community and our whole world. That is the illumination that has always made all the difference in the world.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON NINETEEN

VOCATION:
ISAIAH 6:1-8

Here I am. Send me!

I remember vividly the exact spot where I stood, in the north parking lot, just outside the Old Speer Library, at Princeton Seminary when I heard the news that President Kennedy was shot. It is imprinted upon my memory like a graphic picture crisper and more detailed than a digital photograph on a computer screen. I recall every feature of that moment: the place, the setting, the weather, the persons present, and the emotional shock. It was one of those moments when life stands still just long enough for you to know that nothing will ever be the same again.

Apparently that is the kind of experience Isaiah had, as described in Isaiah 6:1-8. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and God's presence filled the temple!" Isaiah sensed his experience of massive illumination as though it was a theophany, an actual vision of God himself. The graphic and dramatic details of the moment were imprinted permanently upon his memory. He discerned that experience not only as a theophany, a moment of utter envelopment by divine presence, an illumination, but as an event of his call to divine vocation. He was called to ministry.

Such awesome experiences are life-defining moments. My own personal experience of call to ministry was much like that of Isaiah. Seventy three years ago I stepped out of the dim interior of the horse barn into a bright summer sun. I was suddenly enveloped by a cocoon of brilliant light that shown around and through me. I felt totally illuminated as though a transcendent ray of heavenly presence and imbued me with untrammeled peace and utter clarity. It was a life-shaping event of numinous revelation. Instantly I knew who I was and what I was called to do. My life's vocation and destiny was in that moment completely spelled out to me. In the same theophany I was delivered from the burden on my heart for the prior two awful years and I knew at my core that I was called to spend my life helping all the people around me who were suffering

immensely from the Great Depression and the looming clouds of war. When I was five my little brother and sister died and my dear little girl friend, Esther, burned to death, as I tried in vain to rescue her. Children dying in our community was an inordinately common experience but this was horror. For me, death seemed to loom over everything. When Esther died I was five and a darkness enveloped me and lasted until I was seven.

In that instantaneous, shimmering moment at the horse barn door it was clear to me that the one person in our community who seemed to stand above it all and had the ability to be of real help to our people was the minister. He was a man whom I greatly respected at seven years of age. If I were really called to help suffering humanity I could see no way before me but to follow his model into ministry. In that moment, I was sure it was my vocation, the call of God for my life. It has surely proven to be true. It has been a straight line for me from that moment of illumination to this moment in this pulpit. My vision and vocation came after two years of blinding and depressing pain. Vocation usually comes out of some kind of suffering that tunes our inner selves to be ready for a resolution, a new understanding that gives the feeling of hope for a way forward toward meaningfulness.

Vocation, I repeat, is a defining moment of illumination. It tells us who we really are. It is a matter of discovering our identity before the face of God. In that sense it is a revelation to us of our destiny. It is the call of God for us.

Not all moments of vocation are such dramatic experiences of illumination. Most of us do not have theophanies like Isaiah did. Not all of us see a sign written in the sky, as Constantine said he did. In fact, sometimes such dramatic visions can be quite wrong in what they seem to reveal to us. I had a friend in seminary who said he had come to school from his Iowa farm because he had a vision in which he saw written in the sky two large letters: P.C. He knew they meant for him to "Preach Christ," God's call to ministry. He did rather poorly in seminary and so one of the professors wryly asked him whether it was possible that the vision might have meant "Plant Corn." Most human experiences of God's call to our life's destiny are not dramatic at all. However, they always have some of the same elements as are common in Isaiah's vocation and in my own. That is, experiences of vocation always contain a dawning awareness of what our lives seem to be leading up to and what is our heart's desire. We are led along to the point at which a certain unfolding course for our lives is the only thing that makes good sense, the only thing that gives real meaning to us, the only thing that fills us with a sense of hopefulness for the future.

For me, my experience of vocation came as a clear and open path out of my darkness and desperation. I realized that this call to ministry after two years of depressing and anguished darkness spoke to me of what could become my life's bliss. C. S. Lewis once said that all of us have some moments of special insight and divine illumination in our lives. When they happen to us we know with certainty that God has come close to us, touched us, and that there is no other way of accounting for it. We know very well that it is of the Divine Spirit. Then we spend the next six weeks rationalizing that away, said Lewis. It is good that my vocation came to me out of such great suffering because the call was so great a release and renovation of my life that I never second-guessed it from that moment to this. The illumination never left me to this very time.

We must follow our bliss in life. That is always of the Spirit. For example, a parent may wish to be a corporate president but find his or her bliss in family and children. Or, vice versa, a parent may wish to invest his or her life in family and children but find the real bliss of life in working the line at General Motors, being an accountant or a teacher, or being appointed as a corporate president. Finding one's bliss is finding God's call – that for which God made us!

Right after the famous Vatican II Ecumenical Council which Pope John XXIII instigated, to reform the Roman Catholic Church, there arose in France an important movement of laypersons who wished to promote the priesthood of all believers. They become known as the worker priests. They were ordained as lay ministers who worked in ordinary jobs but also carried out ministry in their work and in their spare time. They found their divine calling to be a special quality of spirituality within the framework of everyday living. It was a significant movement that affected the church greatly.

That perspective was not remarkably different from John Calvin's notion about vocation. He believed in the priesthood of all believers and was sure that wherever we find ourselves serving in life that is the place God has called us to be. He emphasized that the shoemaker is as much called by God to his work in service to humankind as the preacher or the pope. He said that it had to do primarily with seeing oneself within the world-wide economy of God, bringing in the reign of God's grace and love in this world, and sensing we have found our bliss in it.

It is worthwhile to look again at Isaiah's experience of vocation. One of the remarkable things in it that is common to all subtle or dramatic experiences of such illumination, is the fact that Isaiah's mindset was shaped by a *certain kind* of world view. Isaiah said, "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and God's presence filled the whole temple; and I said, 'Woe

is me! I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips and dwell in a generation of unclean lips.' Then God said, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for me?' And I said, 'Here am I, Lord, send me!'"

Isaiah was able to see his vision and experience his vocation because he had come to that moment with a world view which assumed that God stood outside this world, "high and lifted up," and embraced this world in caring divine arms. He had the eyes to see that God held Isaiah personally in his loving hands. Isaiah was equipped with a sense of the world moving in a matrix of benevolent divine providence. So for Isaiah it was believable that God was speaking to him and calling him to a special role in that kind of divine economy. It was that kind of matrix, created for me by my father's godly thought and my mother's Bible stories, hymns, and personal piety that illumined my life with a hopeful vocation. Without it, I fear, I would have had no way to see the vision on that bright sunny morning outside the horse barn door. I would not have been open to that instantaneous illumination. I fear I would have missed my vocation. I would have lost my way in the darkness and the dead-end of my life between 5 and 7 years of age.

We can recognize our vocation when a number of factors converge in our consciousness. When 1) there is an opportunity for us to follow a certain course in life to which we seem to be drawn, 2) there are resources available to make it possible for us to go in that direction, 3) we clearly have the talents for it, 4) there is a need in God's world for it, and 5) it becomes our heart's desire. Then we know that it is the call of God.

Recently I saw the film on Mitch Albom's new book, *Five People You Will Meet in Heaven*. It is an average film, but probably worth seeing. The main character meets five people from his past and each gives him an important message that makes heaven blessed for him. The first is a man who died from a car crash caused by the main character, as a child, running into the street to retrieve a ball. That man teaches him that great good comes out of tragedy. The second is an army buddy who was killed in combat and teaches him that sacrifice is not depriving but fulfilling. The third is his abusive father who teaches him that hatred is a curved blade that stabs the hater, while forgiveness frees the forgiver more than the forgiven. The fourth is his wife who died early of cancer and teaches him that memories of love are an adequate companion.

The fifth is a little Vietnamese girl whom he killed with napalm but who carried him to heaven when he was killed in an accident while saving a little girl. In heaven he heals the Vietnamese girl of her wounds and scars and she teaches him that, whereas he always thought his life as a mechanic at the amusement park was a waste, he was right where he

needed to be. He had kept the children safe there for so many years, and in the end had saved a little girl when one of the rides broke and would have crushed her. It killed him instead.

He was right where God had called him to be, not in any kind of determinism, but in the sense that God enters into every situation, where ever we find ourselves, and can make it useful and meaningful. It then produces growth in us, even from the pain, and gives our lives meaning we had not expected, in service of the needs of others. That is undoubtedly why the Bible says, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might!" It is God's call for you. It is your vocation.

Surely this is the faith of Julian of Norwich who described God's grace and providence best of all. She said, "All will be well. And all will be very well. And every sort of thing will be very, very well!"

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWENTY

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS: JOHN 10:10B-18, ACTS 4:5-12, PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11

I came that you may have a really enriched life

For Growing Children

Whose name do you most easily remember? Your own, of course! When you are my age, you sometimes wonder if you can remember that. Sometimes I find myself saying to someone, "Let me tell you about this very good friend of mine and what he did the other day. His name is …." Then, suddenly I cannot remember the name of this very good friend. Sometimes when people get very much older than I, and feeble, they actually cannot remember their own names. I knew an elderly saint of God who, on some days, could not remember the names of her own children, and sometimes not even her own name. But until the day she died she could sing the songs about Jesus, her Lord. She never had trouble remembering the name of Jesus. For her, his name was above every name, even above her own name.

That is true today almost everywhere in the world. Everyone knows the name of Jesus, and once you know it you cannot forget it. His name really is above every name today, everywhere for practically every one. Even those who do not honor him cannot forget his name. We gather at church every Sunday to think and talk and sing about the name of Jesus. For us his name is above every name, and we will never forget it or stop celebrating it.

The three scriptures for this sermon have one main thing in common. They all refer to the importance of Jesus' name. The first one says that his followers know his name. The second says that only in his name can we be saved. The last scripture says that his name is above every name and at his name every body shall bow in respect.

Shakespeare asked, “What’s in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet!” Who am I to challenge William Shakespeare, but, you know I think names count. They are important. At my home I have a nice rose garden. If you come to visit me I will let you smell my roses. Suppose, however, I took you out there and I said to you, “This is a ragweed garden. Come here and smell the ragweed.” I could call it a cauliflower garden and invite you to smell the cauliflowers. Somehow that would detract from the wonderful appeal of the rose garden and the rose perfume. Things would seem different, even if the perfume were the same.

Names make a difference. Soon after I was born I began to realize that when my family said nice things to me or called to me they always used a special word that sounded like “Harold.” I noticed before I was two years old that they did not speak of my brother that way. They used different sounds. They used “Stanley” to speak with him. I began to think of myself as Harold. There is no inherent reason why the sounds involved in that name should mean me; but by now that is especially what they mean to me and I like it. My name makes a difference. So does the name, “Rose.”

Names make a difference because they identify the character or kind of person with which we associate the name. Jesus’ name is above every name because of the quality of his character and his kind of person which we associate with that name. We might have called him Jose or Stanley or Dominick, but we did not. He was called Jesus, and of course that means, “Savior.” However, the issue really is that we know what kind of person it is to which the name Jesus refers, and for us and nearly everyone around the world, it is more memorable than every other name.

So what is in his name that makes everyone bow in respect? What is it about Jesus’ name that prompts everyone in life and death to call him, Lord, to the glory of God the Father? Paul says everybody will. Can you see in your mind's eye Adolf Hitler and Joe Stalin standing with joy written all over their faces and saying in pious awe, "My Lord and my God!" Paul says that is what happened when they got to heaven. We gather in church every Sunday to bow before Jesus. We do not kneel in our church, though it might be a good idea; but we come here and we bow our heads, which is like bowing the knee before him. What do we mean to say by that behavior? We mean a lot of things, I think.

First of all, we mean that we honor him. I think we honor him for his courage. He stood for the things that were right and that needed to be changed in his world and he had the courage to stand up for those important things in the face of much opposition. He stood for the right

even if people hated him for it and killed him. He did not back down. I honor him for that and it makes me want to bow before him.

Secondly, we bow before him because we are thankful to him. If your grandfather does something very important for you or just does something very important in his life, you might go to him and shake his hand. You would thank and congratulate him. As you do that, almost unconsciously you dip your head down a bit in honor of him. You bow before a person who does great things. I will tell you why I bow in gratitude to Jesus. I am grateful to him because he was a truth-teller. He told the truth about God when it was not popular to tell the truth about God. People had a lot of strange ideas about God and this man from Nazareth came walking down the dusty road and started to tell the startling truth about things. His truth changed my life completely, from neurotic worry and fear to relief and peace and meaning. I want to bow before him in thankfulness for his being an uncompromising truth-teller. He told the truth that God's grace saves every human being in the end.

Thirdly, we bow before Jesus in amazement. I am always amazed about the truth he told. He told the truth about the fact of God's radical, unconditional, and universal grace. He made it very plain that God is not a threat, as most people think, but is a friend who forgives us for everything. He forgave us completely before we are born (Micah 7:18-20) and before we could figure out how to be clever sinners. He made it clear that God is a God of love and not at all of judgment. He is not trying to shape us up but to clear things up for us. God is busy delivering us from all our fear and guilt and shame so we can use that wasted energy on growing in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The fourth reason we bow before the name and person of Jesus is that when he made that claim about God's unconditional love and grace for every human being, he would not back down. He said everyone will be saved and he did not care about the arguments of the case. When everybody else was busy saying that God only loved those who thought they were special and were behaving nicely, Jesus said right out loud that God loves all of us, and cares especially for those who are bad and badly off. Moreover, Jesus kept right on saying it

That is why I worship the Lord and follow his way. That is the thing he said that changed my life completely. He said, "I am come that you might have life and that you might experience what real living really is; that you might have a truly enriched life" (Jn 10:10). I am sure God is glad when we come to worship and bow to the name and person of Christ Jesus. I am sure he likes to hear us say that we love Jesus – and say that his name is above every name for all of us. You know what he says back to us? Look

at the communion table with the bread and wine on it: the broken bread (his body) and the poured out wine (his blood). Can you hear what God is saying to you through the bread and the wine? God says, "I love you and want you to be completely free of fear and guilt and shame. I want you to be free to be yourself, stop worrying about sinning, and joyfully celebrate Jesus' name above all other things. I want you to be spiritually nurtured with the spiritual food symbolized in the bread and wine - grace, mercy, and peace. I want you to have a full order of Shalom!"

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWENTY ONE

LET THE LORD LEAD:
PSALM 67

> "Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for the Lord judges people with equity and guides the nations upon the earth". My theme today is, "Let the Lord lead", and I would like to reflect on Psalm 67:4 and 7. "May God continue to bless us ... Let all the ends of the earth revere God".

This psalm is unusual for an Old Testament (OT) scripture. There is a theme running through the entire OT which focuses on Israel as the particular people of God. You could read the OT and come away believing that God is a particularist god, but that would be a mistaken notion. God embraces us all in forgiving grace. The idea of a particularist god who has chosen a particular people, and by that act has excluded other people of every age, time, and nation, has been debated from long before ancient Israel.

The Christian community that follows on the faith tradition of ancient Israel continued that debate. The debate has been about the difference between particularism and universalism. Because of the fact that by nature we are psychologically always particularists, it has been easier for people, both in ancient Israel and in the history of Christianity, to concentrate on this unfortunate OT theme of particularlism. We are averse, by nature, to seeing all humans as equally God's people. We want to be special. That requires that somebody else is not so special.

I suppose there was a sense in which the Israelites legitimately felt that God had his eye on them; but it is clear throughout the Hebrew Bible that God had his eye on Israel for the purpose of their being a blessing to all the nations. It was a genuine surprise ten or fifteen years ago when the president of Israel stood up in the Knesset and chided the Israeli Parliament and his citizenry. He said that they were constantly putting their own national interests ahead of the interests of the Palestinians. It was a voice in Israel unexpected and dangerous to express. Nonetheless, the president of Israel said, "Let us remember that our Bible, the Hebrew Bible, has called Israel into existence in the first place to be a blessing and

a healing to the nations (Gen 12, 17). Our job is not to fight the Palestinians. Our job is to find a way to embrace a relationship of grace with the Palestinians." You surely will not hear that kind of sound from the Israeli government today. He epitomized in that speech the message that ran through the Bible for 1000 years. It is amazing that the message has been so easily missed, especially by the ancient Jews and the modern Israeli. It is the message of God's universalism, the message of God's universal embrace of humanity in grace through the message of the Bible that happened to come to us from ancient Israel and its Christian Jewish followers.

When I was raised in the Dutch Reformed Church it was an assumed theological principle that God had elected a particular group of people, indeed a specific number, to be saved. By that act God had either intentionally unelected the mass of humanity or at least passed them by. It was either an active reprobation or a passive reprobation, and the Dutch Reformed Christians were absolutely convinced that was the case.

It had terrible psychological effects, of course. There were people in our community at that time who believed that they had no clear evidence whether God had elected them. They were terrified. They lived their entire lives in fear. They were afraid to celebrate Holy Communion because if they were reprobate they were doing it contrary to the instructions of Paul in I Corinthians 11:23-29. There he says, "If you take communion inappropriately you wreak judgment upon yourself." So, you can imagine how that scared the day lights out of people who were perfectly fine Christian people. There were others who were so sure that they were among the elect that there was no problem for them but they were clear about the fact that most of the rest of the world was "outside the pale," as they said.

The point is that the overwhelmingly dominant message of the Bible from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22 is clearly the message that God's embrace is as wide as the world. The language in Psalm 67 constantly refers to all the people, all the nations of the earth. God's embrace reaches to the ends of the earth. God is not a one armed lover but has two arms that stretch out infinitely to embrace all humanity. There are no limits on God's grace!

I spent a week at Camaldoli Monastery in the mountains near Florence, Italy. It is a fifteenth century place of Christian Humanism and humanitarianism. It is a place to study God and God's wide embrace of grace. We had 80 scholars there for a week, drawn from virtually every nation in the world, including Russia, Ethiopia, and the nations of Asia. Eighty scholars gathered together to study the nature of the presence of

God among us, and particularly to study and understand the testimony for this in the Bible, the Apocrypha, the Pseudepigrapha, and the New Testament. There were Jewish scholars, Christian scholars; Protestant, Catholic, Coptic, and Eastern Orthodox Scholars gathered there to understand better the vigor and scope of God's gracious embrace of all humanity.

It reminded me of the fact that every time we get the notion of particularism in reading the Bible, namely, the impression that God is *for* Israel and *against* everybody else, the thing to do is to conclude immediately that we are reading one of those passages in which Israel has gotten its foreign policy mixed up with the will of God. It is important to turn away from that and turn to the rich river of truth that runs all the way through the center of the Bible, telling us that God so loved the *world*, that God gave his uniquely begotten son, and that God sent that son into the world not to judge or condemn the world, but that the *world* might be saved (John 3:17). God guides, blesses, and saves "the nations upon the earth" (Ps. 67:3)

We are psychologically prone to a kind of Christian particularism. We allow ourselves to think of Christianity as an exclusivist community. Only we are being saved. Only we are the good people of God. It is not biblical to take that perspective. When I was a pastor in New Jersey, every year I was invited by the local rabbi to preach the thanksgiving sermon in the local synagogue. Now this rabbi looked like a regular Englishman from Cambridge, and when I came in, short, stocky, and bearded, they thought I looked like a rabbi. So when the journalist took our picture in front of the Bema, to publish it in the local paper, she always got our names switched. He was identified as the local pastor and I was identified as the local rabbi. Well, I must say, that I kind of liked that confusion of identity. I liked being identified with the broader community of God's people.

One day I was worshiping in Adat Shalom, a synagogue in Farmington Hills, and as we were leaving an elderly Jewish lady turned to me, because I guess I looked like the rabbi, and asked me what the Hebrew inscription was above the Bema. Fortunately I was able to read that inscription for her and she peacefully left the synagogue sure that she had just been instructed by a wise rabbinic servant of the Lord. Being tempted to fall into a particularist notion about our relationship with God is just not the way of the Lord.

One of the times I lectured at the American University in Cairo, Egypt, Professor Michael Said introduced me, not quite accurately, as an Islamic scholar. My identity was constantly broadening to my great entertainment and delight. The best such occasion, though, was when a black patient of

mine invited me to preach in his church. He was a successful pastor downtown Detroit, who had been doing marvelously good work in his all black community. When he introduced me, of course, he had to say something about the fact that he was doing the unexpected thing by bringing this white guy downtown to preach in his African American Church. So he mentioned a number of things I have done in my life, and then said, “you need to know that in spite of all of this Dr. Ellens may be white faced but he is really black hearted”.

The more one lives the more one acquires a universalizing sense of the people of God and an intuitive sense of the way in which all of us are together in the quest for God's grace. All of us need to recognize that the problem of evil, suffering, and neediness in this world is infinitely greater than all of us. We need each other. The closer we are to each other, the closer we are to the heart of God.

You know that I have preached about Gods radical grace throughout my ministry. I hope that when I am gone what will be remembered is God’s universal grace. I hope that I will be remembered as a Christian universalist. I hope that we are moving past this long fruitless tension and debate in the communities of God’s people, between particularist notions of God’s special favors to special people and the real truth of God’s universal embrace of all humanity. God's intent is that all should be blessed and healed by his universal affection.

You know that ten centuries before Christ Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem. Now if there was ever a moment in the history of Israel when they would have felt that they had the right to really "stick it up the nose" of all the other nations, that would have been the moment. They had this grand temple finally erected. They had enshrined the Ark of the Covenant in the temple in Jerusalem. That was the special symbol of God’s presence to Israel. They had built a wonderful city out of the fortress of the Jebuzites that David had conquered and taken by force. They had established the boundaries of the kingdom of Israel from the Tigris to the Nile. I mean Israel owned the world as they knew it. If there was a moment when they would have felt the right to arrogance and to the notion that God was in a special way their private possession, the dedication of Solomon's temple would have been the moment.

However, read that prayer of Solomon for dedicating the temple. The striking phrases in his prayer bring tears to my eyes. He says, “If anyone from any land should lift up his eyes and turn his heart toward this temple and toward you, oh God, then hear thou from heaven, bless his land, and heal him.” Solomon knew God's truth 1000 BCE. When did this truth get corrupted and forgotten? Solomon knew a thousand years before Jesus.

Jesus had to say again. "God sent not his son into the world to exclude anybody but that the *world* through him should be saved (Jn 3:17)."

About a year ago I was driving east on I 96. As I turned onto I 696 almost immediately I saw an Arabic fellow walking along the side of the expressway with a satchel in his hand. I stopped and picked him up. I said, "Where are you headed?" He said, "I'm walking home, my car stalled on the ramp". I said, "Well we can go back and see if you can start your car". "No", he said, "my dad has a tow-truck business. I'll go home and then we'll come back and get it." "Where is home?" I asked as I was pulling off into Farmington Hills. He said, "Dearborn".

I said, "You're walking to Dearborn?"

"Yes."

"Well why didn't you call your dad."

"I don't have any change in my pocket, I don't have any money on me. I just got fired from my job because my car wouldn't start this morning and I got there late; third day on the job."

"Well I'll take you to Dearborn."

I drove back onto the highway and headed for Dearborn. We got near to Michigan Avenue, and I said, "Where do you have to go?"

"Well I live over there; but just pull off here by this gas station and I will walk from there."

Obviously he did not want to be seen in my car at his home.

I said, "Well I'll be glad to take you there."

He said, "You must be Islamic, you must be a Muslim."

"No, as a matter of fact I'm a Christian. Why did you say I was a Muslim?"

"Because you are so kind, because you are full of grace. Why did you so willingly bring me all the way to Dearborn, so far out of your way?"

"I did it because I am a Christian. I believe it is the godly thing to do."

I felt like I was kicked in the belly. Here was a young man, about 22, who really believes that if you are a Christian you are a monster, if you are full of grace you must be a Muslim. How many Christians conversely have that same attitude toward Muslims? How did we corrupt our reputation?

The true word of the Bible is "May God continue to bless us! Let all ends of the earth revere God! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy. God judges the people with equity. God guides the nations upon the earth." Maybe it is time for us to follow God's words. You think we might gain more ground toward peace in this world if we let the Lord lead?

Amen. So let it Be!

Sermon Twenty Two

What Shall We Tell Them?: Zechariah 3:1-5

The Lord rebuke you Satan, the Lord who has chosen this people ...
a brand plucked from the fire.

Each September in North America we start the teaching year of the church again. We are a mobile society and many folks travel in summer. Then fall returns and we busy ourselves with the teaching ministry of the church until June. What do we intend to say this year? What shall we tell the children in the Sunday school in the next nine months? What shall we tell each other? What should I tell you as the teaching Pastor?" I think there is a concrete answer to that question and I think that it is easy to slide into the fall program without specifying what it is we really have as our teaching objective. Then the program can stumble along in an amorphous way instead of with concerted focus. What should we tell those who wish to learn during the next nine months?

I think there are three things. I think we need to tell, and tell again, and keep on telling, and tell in every creative way we can imagine, the *story* of the Bible: the good parts of the story of the Bible and the bad parts of the story of the Bible. There is a lot of good stuff in the Bible that everybody needs to have retold repeatedly so that it sinks into the center of the heart and becomes part of the formation structure of our very selves. There is some bad stuff in the Bible. There is always a debate going on in Christian churches about the nature of scripture. There is always a lot of discussion and sometimes some uncomfortable ambivalence about the fact that there are stories in the Bible that you might wish children never had to hear and that even adults ought to forget. There is some bad stuff in the Bible.

I mean there is a story about Judah wondering off down the road and finding a prostitute and paying her and doing what people sometimes do with prostitutes, only to find out later that she is his daughter-in-law. There is no judgment in the Bible about all of that behavior; no negative valuing of it, no moralization. That is a bad story. Is that a story we are

going to tell our children this fall and winter and spring? Well, it is part of the Bible's story! Are we going to tell them the story or not? I think we need to tell the story.

Secondly, I think we need to tell the story realistically. That is, I think we have to give our children reality, not just from the stories in the Bible, most of which are wonderful reality that will save your soul. I think we have to give our children reality in terms of what comes down the pipe in the newspaper day by day. Children can quite frequently handle reality better than adults can and one thing that children cannot handle very well is the impression that adults are masking the truth or sliding around reality or giving them false models, false notions, false stories. Kids know before you do when you are falsifying or cheating on reality. They can handle reality. They can't handle deception.

The third thing that I think we need to tell each other and our children this year is the radical stories, the radical truths, the radical ways in which God deals with God's story in the Bible. We must tell them about the radical way in which God deals with our story in history, in reality, in its everyday unfolding. It does not do our kids any good for us to try to mask the reality because that is the very material stuff that God intends to lay hold of and turn upside down and inside out in the ministries of God's grace. If we give our children a Pollyannaish view of life, we deprive our children of dealing with reality, ours and then God's. God's way of dealing with our reality even when our reality is sick and sinful, especially when it is sick and sinful, is exactly the story our children need most to hear. David was declared by God to be a man after God's own heart. At the end of his life and throughout his life God called him a man after God's own heart. David was a guerilla fighter, a betrayer of the government, an assassin, a murderer, and an adulterer. David did just about anything really nasty that you can think up in the list of possible imaginations of the sick human heart.

God turned that inside out and upside down by God's grace, goodness, and guidance. So in the end God could say, "This man is a man after my own heart. The man who wrote Psalm 32, 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven and whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no guile.' The man who wrote Psalm 103, 'Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me. Bless His holy name.'" Those Psalms don't come out of pretty stories. They come out of the hell of a human being who has wrestled with the worst kind of shadow sides of his own inner self and found the grace of God waiting for him there.

Those precious psalms have comforted and consoled the people of God for 3000 years, and they come out of the moral and spiritual dead end streets of life in which David finally found God as the God of the great reversal. He found the God who changes pain into growth and tragedy into triumph and sin into salvation and godlessness into grace. God, who will take the impasse of our rapprochement with Islam and turn it inside out and upside down, moving this present world tragedy into some kind of salvation, if we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

If we hide the harshness of reality from our children, they will not see the glory of God's grace. God is the God of great reversals. Out of repression God brings revelation, God's great experiment in renewal and redemption. Out of revolution in 1776 God brought reformation and democracy. Out of bondage in Egypt, by God's mighty hand and out stretched arm, God brought the Exodus. That biblical metaphor of the Exodus has become the defining metaphor of human existence. God is the God of these radical reversals; and in the story in our scripture today that is eminently plain.

You may remember that Presbyterianism was started in Scotland by a group of people who abandoned the Anglican Church. There was a great deal of bitterness between the two denominations. An Anglican Bishop and devoted saint of God at the time lay on his death bed. Just as he was about to die he asked somebody to call the Presbyterian pastor, who came quickly. The dying Anglican said to the Presbyterian pastor, "I want to convert to Presbyterianism." So the pastor led him through his conversion. Now this dying man's son came to him and said, "Dad, how could you possibly do that? How could you, in the last moments of your life, give up everything you had been devoted to all you life? How could you convert to being a Presbyterian?" He said, "Well, I figured if somebody had to die - better it be one of them than one of us."

God's way of turning things inside out and upside down is exactly the opposite of that. God does not say that it is better one of them than one of us. When push came to shove, God's design for the great reversal in all of history and in our lives was, "If somebody is going to die, better it be one of us than one of them." So God sent God's unique son, and in the Old Testament already there is this story about Joshua (Zech 2) which foretells and foresees the great reversal that is acted out in the drama of Jesus Christ. Joshua was brought to trial in God's eternal court room. His filthy clothing represented all of the sins and iniquities of Israel's covenant-breaking and God-forsaking history. Joshua was standing there under judgment and Satan, acting as his defense attorney, was reading into the record the moral and spiritual tragedy of Israel's history. The crescendo

was building. The hammer was about to come down. You could see the wretched priest shrinking in his dirty sandals, scandalized by the sins and iniquities of God's people.

Just then the Angel of the Lord stepped forward and said, "God rebukes you, Satan. God, who has chosen these people, rebukes you. As a brand, God has plucked them from the fires of hell. God has chosen them in spite of themselves. The Lord rebukes you! These are not your people, though they look and act like the devil. They are God's people, in spite of themselves." They are God's people, not because of the quality of their characters and behavior, but because of the character and behavior of the faithful God of the Great Reversals.

Let us deal with sinful reality with our children so that this reality of grace can become a shaping and forming relief. Let it be a salvation to them from the harsh realities of everyday human existence. They are going to need to deal with their own harsh and sinful realities, whether we like it or not. Those are going to impact them whether we like it or not. Their human realities are going to push and shove and distort and corrupt their lives whether we like it or not. We can not protect our children from reality, but we can prepare them through our perspective on reality to achieve and experience God's ultimate reality. They are like brands plucked from the fire by God's grace. Our children must go through the fire. There is no way to protect our children from the fires of the hellishness of this life. They need to know that they cannot sin themselves out of God's grace nor squirm from his long embrace. David could not. They cannot.

There is a great deal of talk today about the fact that the Presbyterian Church has lost two thirds of its membership since 1960. I do not know why that is true, but I will tell you why we lost one third. It was because we spent the 60's and the 70's and the 80's and the 90's of the last century trying to protect our children from the biblical story. We did everything else under the sun in Presbyterian Sunday school curricula than tell the story.

We did everything under the sun to protect our kids from reality. We acted like our stories were nicer than God's story. As a consequence, those children of the church knew we were falsifying the data and when it came time for them to grasp the grace of God they did not know enough about God's story of the great reversals to know what they were doing. They figured that if they could get the same thing in the YMCA as in our Sunday schools they surely did not need to come to church and spend half of Sunday wasting their time.

So they left the church. Now hungry for the story or some story that will give them a sense of the great reversal that they need in their lives for their salvation, some of them are going off to the Evangelical Churches who are at least telling some form of the story. Others are mumbling that they are spiritual but no longer religious and are wandering around in a pool of mutual spiritual ignorance. Damned shame!

God said of God's people represented by Joshua the High Priest, “They are a brand that I have plucked from the fire. Sure, they are covenant breaking, God forsaking people, but I love them, in spite of themselves. I chose them for no good reason except that they are wretched and insignificant and irrelevant and nasty and obtuse and obscene and disobedient; so I could never find anywhere in history a people that makes such a nice illustration of my radical grace and my strategy of the great reversals of salvation."

“The Lord rebukes you, Satan. I, the Lord, who have chosen all people in spite of themselves, rebukes you. I am going to take this old piece of drift wood that I have pulled out of the bonfires of hell and I am going to clean it up. I am going to polish it, shape it, and put it on the mantel of the universe. If the world lasts a million years all people will see it there, return to this story, and know that I am the God who deals redemptively with tragic human reality. I am the God of the great reversals, the God whose grace is so surprisingly radical that you can not really grasp it unless you get the point that I deal with the worst realities and I make them the best possibilities”. They killed Jesus of Nazareth. That is the worst thing that ever happened. God turned that into the demonstration of how far God would go to embrace us in forgiving grace and love. That is the best thing that ever happened. God got our attention. God will get our children's attention in the same way.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWENTY THREE

READ THE BIBLE:
PSALM 119:11

I have hidden your word in my heart
so that there is a decreased chance that I will sin against you.

There can be no question about the fact that the Bible changed the world. Indeed, it is inescapably clear that the Bible has repeatedly changed the world, for good or ill. At the time that Jesus was born the Roman Empire was enjoying a season of fifty years of remarkable peace and prosperity. It was called the *Pax Romana*. It had to do with the superb government that Augustus Caesar (Octavian) managed to impose upon the entire Roman Empire, following the Civil Wars incited by the assassination of Julius Caesar. It was a time of wonderful opportunity for anyone living between India and the Straights of Gibraltar, between what is now Scotland and the Sahara Desert. It was a grand world into which Jesus was born.

It was sort of like the ideal world that the Greatest Generation of Americans created and we all enjoyed in the fifties and early sixties of the last century. It was a time of enormous growth, inventiveness, experimentation, marvelous cultural explosion, productive manufacturing, international trade, prosperity, and peace. Just as in the case of America in the social revolution of the late sixties and seventies, the death of Augustus in 14 CE set in motion a dilatory process in which the middle managers of the Empire, children and grandchildren of that heroic generation that had created the *Pax Romana* of the Augustan Era, undervalued and even devalued the great achievements of their fathers.

The new generation was narcissistic, self-indulgent, and a group who felt entitled. They thought that they had everything coming to them by right, not by earning it, and that the world owed them a luxuriant living. So they began to complain, bitch, moan, criticize, and erode the magnificent world Augustus Caesar and his responsible subordinates had built. Thus, by the time of Jesus' death the Roman Empire was in trouble.

That disturbance of the peace and ferment in domestic tranquility, that spirit of narcissism and negativism, like what we see today coming from

every facet of our mass media, created a slump of psychological dissatisfaction throughout the empire. This became the opening for the incursion of the Christian gospel. When Paul says, "In the fullness of time God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem those who were under the law," he meant that the Augustan Era had created a model of ideal enlightened government, and it was now in jeopardy. Some new and definitive initiative was badly needed and intensely longed for.

A new idealism was necessary. It was the idealism of the Christian Faith that soon filled the vacuum. Within seventy years of the death of Christ, that is, by the end of the first century, there were 3,000,000 Christians throughout the Mediterranean Basin. By the end of the third century there were 10,000,000, and the Roman army was almost completely Christianized. There was a great vacuum and into it the power of God's spirit poured the Christian message, with its idealism and its view of the meaningfulness of human life before the face of God.

Out of that came the writings of the New Testament. As the Roman Empire continued to falter in terms of the old pagan values, in the hearts of Roman citizens everywhere it became increasingly the Christian Empire. The Bible changed the world. The Medieval Church and world got away from the Bible. With the fall of the Roman Empire in the seventh century CE, literacy fell to a new low and the Bible could no longer be read by the general populace.

Moreover, the official view of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages tended to advise against the reading of the Bible. The authorities thought that the people could not understand it correctly, would misinterpret it, and so they should listen only to what the church said in the liturgy of the mass. Only the priests should read and interpret the Bible, but many of the priests could not read and did not know what the Bible said. They only knew the liturgy of the mass that they had memorized in Latin. Even that they often garbled, so that, for example the most important moment in the mass when Christ says, "*Hoc est enim corpus meum*" ("For this is my body"), often was turned, in the ignorant priest's language and in the ears of the congregation, into, "Hocus pocus."

This state of affairs prevailed until the Protestant Reformation, when the Bible again completely changed the world. Luther's cry went all round Europe, "*Sola Scriptura*!" Only the Bible! On the basis of the Bible, "*Sola Fidei*." By faith alone! On the basis of that faith in the message of the Bible, "*Sola Gracia*." By grace alone! Thus the Bible was lifted up again in the 16th century, as the generator of new spiritual life. It changed the world once more. The Bible continues to become the instrument of

God's Spirit to change the world, your personal world, and our cultural world in history.

Now that is not without problems. We have often spoken here of the importance of reading the Bible to get the big picture of what the Bible has to tell us. That big picture is the sturdy mainstream of the theology of grace that flows throughout the Bible from Genesis 3:15 to the last chapter of the Book of Revelations. That flowing stream is the stream of hope in God's radical, unconditional, and universal grace.

However, as I said, that wonderful fact of life is not without its problems. Every morning during the week I pick up my 10 year old and take him to school. When I do that we stop for a little while and we read together a passage from the Bible and we pray together. A funny thing has come to my attention again in that process, and that is how much of the Bible is really annoying, to say the least, when you are reading it to the fresh young mind of a ten year old. Even in the gospels there is a lot of stuff I do not want any kid to have to read.

What do you do about that? On the one hand we want to hold on to the Bible as a life-changing and world-changing instrument of God's Spirit. At the same time we must face the fact that there is a lot of it that is annoying and unhelpful, indeed, disgusting. Some of it is downright destructive, as I have discussed in detail in my book, *The Destructive Power of Religion, Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*.

Thomas Jefferson had a problem with the Bible, you know. He said, "There is a lot of stuff in here that a sane man just cannot put up with." So he went through the Bible and cut out a lot of material that was annoying to him, and that he just could not abide. Today you can actually buy a copy of what is called *The Jefferson Bible*. The trouble with his Bible, however, is that the things that annoyed him are not the things that annoy me. What he wanted to eliminate was all the supernatural stuff in it. He cut out all the miracles and the supernatural events of divine intervention in history.

What he had left was a secular book which had removed from it all the acts, intimations, and evidences of the presence of the spirit of God in human experience. I think he eliminated the wrong things. Moreover, nobody ever took his Bible seriously, except Jefferson himself. I once promised myself that one day I would publish an edition of the Psalms in which I eliminated all the material that goes against the divine grace message in those marvelous poetic songs. I think eventually I will still do that, when I have time and leisure to do so.

I want to publish an edition of the Psalms from which I eliminate all the verses that have to do with petitioning or thanking God for killing

David's enemies or asking God for the power to smash the heads of all the enemy's children on the stones at the base of the wall of Jerusalem. I want to get that stuff out of there and see what the Psalms look like when they are properly cleaned up, that is, when the *grace in the Psalms* can stand out as its divine message. I figure that if I did that I would have about two thirds of the Psalms texts left.

I do not know whether I would want to recommend my edition of the Psalms as having any special importance or authority, but it would be worth the experiment to get a look at what they would be like if you got all that pathological garbage out of there. That suggests to me that if we are going to be real readers of the Bible, like we want to be as Christians, so we can get the big biblical picture, we must learn how to sort out the garbage from the gospel. We should read the whole Bible, as it stands, from beginning to end, and we should read it often; but we should consciously and intentionally sort the garbage from the gospel.

We should read it while trying to separate out the cultural-historical matrix of this body of literature, from the clean mainstream of the word of grace which it carries in it. This mainstream is the story of the divinely inspired spirit-illuminations about the nature and meaning of our life with God. That is the flowing stream of God's redeeming grace in the Bible that constantly changes us and our world. Only then can we get properly in focus the big picture of the Bible's message.

One of the most shaping events in my entire life, I must tell you, is the fact that I went to the Lucas East Side Christian School for the first eight grades: one room, one teacher, eight grades, 43 students. Wonderful education! I wish my grandchildren had the equivalent. In order to graduate from the eighth grade I had to memorize 252 sections from the Bible: large chunks of the scripture such as the Lord's Prayer, Psalms 19, 32, 51, the Beatitudes, and the like.

It was one of the most shaping experiences of my life because from the time I graduated from the eighth grade, I could never forget those scriptures. They are all verses about the central message of God's grace. They certainly inspired the shaping of my life in the direction of Christian ministry. Consequently, when I am studying, teaching, or preaching, those verses keep coming back to me. You have heard me reciting them spontaneously in my sermons. They keep coming back to my mind when they are appropriate for some illustration, because from 12 years of age, I had those down cold. I cannot get them out of my mind. I suppose that when I am really old and forgetting everything else, those verses will continue to console my spirit.

In this and other ways, the Bible changed my life. In this way the Bible changed the world as the Roman Empire was coming apart at the seams. In this way the Bible changed the world at the time of the Reformation. Martin Luther translated the entire Bible into German so every farm hand and shop keeper could read it. He said, "We can teach our German sparrows to sing as sweetly as the Greek and Latin nightingales."

It was the Bible that changed everything. We *must* read the Bible. We must make it our heart and soul and mind and strength. Now, you know that there is a great reticence in our schools today to get children to memorize. Even in our Sunday Schools we do not make a big deal of memorization. I think we should. If we give our children nothing else than the story of the Bible and a lot of verses to memorize, that will serve them for the long run and it will change their lives. Memorization! Kids can memorize the popular songs in a minute. They can learn how to run a computer in half a minute. If I cannot figure out how to set up my electronic equipment all I need to do is ask my ten year old. He can punch a few buttons and it is all set up. He cannot figure out why I am so stupid.

Children can memorize today as well as they ever could, but they are not being asked to memorize the things that count. They can memorize scripture if we require it. They need to memorize scripture. It will change their lives. David understood that. It made all the difference in the world for him. He said, "Thy word have I hid in my heart that I may not sin against thee." He knew it could become *the* life-changing power in ones spirit.

Every year the Gideons have their big annual convention. You know about the Gideons. They distribute Bibles, free of charge, everywhere in the world. It is one of the best things that the believing community can do. Get the word out there. The Gideons tell marvelous stories about what happens from distributing the word; and at least half of those stories are true.

What do the Gideons do? What is their philosophy of life? They know the Bible changed the world. They know the Bible changes lives. They know that all they need to do is put the seed out there everywhere and the Divine Spirit will make it grow. If that works for the world in the ministry of the Gideons, it will work for you. It will work for our children. Let us throw the seed out there. Let us get the Bible into their spirits, into their minds, into their souls. Let us help them learn it by heart and hold it in their hearts.

Sow the seeds and expect the spirit to make it work. That is the *way* the Bible changes the world. That is *why* it changes the world. That is *how* it

changed my life, my ministry, and who I am. It changed everything, in all the important ways that the spirit shaped me. All that to get out of the eighth grade! I was pretty anxious to get out of the eighth grade! I had to learn the Bible. I had to memorize the Bible. Few better things ever happened to me. I was highly motivated to do it because I was highly motivated to graduate.

"Thy Word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee!" That was David's story. That is my story! Could that become your story - your children's story?

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWENTY FOUR

SAVED BY WATER:
I PETER 3:18-21

A few, that is eight, were saved by water

I am sure you found the scripture this morning rather strange. It tells a story about Jesus' trip between his death and resurrection. It says he visited the souls in bondage in some sort of underworld. That sounds more like an ancient Greek myth than a Christian story. It is not so different, of course, from the notion in the Old Testament about life after death. There we often find the word, *Sheol,* referring to the abode of the dead, and it does not differentiated between a place of blessing or curse. There is no heaven or hell in the Hebrew Bible. The King James Version of the Bible did not know what to do with such an idea so it simply kept the word, *Sheol*, and attempted no translation of it. Sometimes it has been interpreted to mean hell but that would be completely false.

In the Apostles Creed we have that section which declares that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and he descended into hell." That part of the creed which claims he descended into hell is a misinterpretation of this passage from I Peter. Peter says that Jesus was "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah." It is hard to understand why Peter put that in his epistle because it is nonsense.

However, it leads to an important and interesting passage a few verses later. Peter says that there is a useful correlation to be seen between Noah's experience of the flood and our experience of baptism. It is that point that I want to make this morning. We regularly celebrate the sacrament of baptism. Peter declares that in baptism we are saved by water, as Noah was saved by water at the time of the flood. This is the only phrase of this sort in the Bible, yet much theology has been built around it.

How are we to understand this? How are we saved by water? Some in the history of Christianity have interpreted this to mean that our infection

by the original sin of Adam is washed away by the sacrament of baptism. That Roman Catholic idea is certainly not what Peter meant by the declaration, "We are saved by water." Peter says that we are saved by the water as Noah was saved by the water. Now I always thought that Noah was saved from the water, not by the water. I always thought that the water of the flood was the thing that Noah and his generation were up against. That was the danger, the threat, and the terminal onslaught which took away Noah's entire generation.

That is not what Peter says. Noah was saved *by* the water, not *from* the water. Think of that story again for a moment. God commanded Noah to build an ark because it was going to rain furiously. Noah entered the ark and the flood came. Some say there was a land bridge at the Dardanelles and it broke through and flooded the inland Black Sea, destroying all the civilizations on its shores. There seems to be some recently published archaeological evidence for that. When the flood rushed in it lifted up the ark and carried Noah off to Mt. Ararat and to his divinely ordered destiny. That is, Noah and his family were not washed away by the flood of waters; they were instead carried up by the water in the God-given craft, and so, being lifted up by the water they were, in that sense, saved by the water and eventually set upon dry land.

If that is the meaning Peter has in the back of his mind when he says that we are saved by the water, as Noah was saved by the water, then we must think of the benefit of baptism differently from the traditional interpretation. That tradition said that we were washed clean of our original sin. That is not Peter's meaning. We must realize that in baptism we have a symbol. We mark our children with God's mark. We put God's symbolic mark upon them and thereby God says, "You are mine. You are my children. You belong to me forever. You cannot do anything that will be able to take you away from me."

That is, there is a special ark provided for these our children. God takes them up in God's arms and declares that nothing can take them from God's embrace. As Noah entered into the ark, so these children have entered into God's ark of the covenant or divine promise symbolized by baptism. When the storms and vicissitudes of life break upon the children, they will be lifted up in God's ark or God's covenant promise: this certification that God has embraced them once and for all! They are saved by water. That symbol of God's promised grace is their sure security for time and eternity. Noah was delivered from the dangerous floods of life's vicissitudes by God's ark, and our children who are marked by the sign and symbol of baptism are delivered from or secured in the dangers of life's spiritual trials and travail by God's ark of covenant promise.

Now the Bible says that salvation is two kinds of things. There is God's act of salvation that is referred to theologically as justification. The Bible says that we are justified by faith, and that means God justifies us. God declares us perfectly OK as his people. Nothing can separate us from that grace of God. That justification becomes operational in us when we open our hearts and minds to it and allow it into our inner selves: when we accept it. By grace we are saved, through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is a gift of God. Justification is a gift of God. That is our guaranteed salvation. That is God's guarantee that God's grace and forgiveness is such toward us that God will not allow our fear, guilt, and shame to get in the way, for he has declared us justified. No matter what we are like, the only thing God can see is that we are saints of God, marked by the promise of God's grace.

The other aspect of salvation is referred to theologically as sanctification. That is the growth process that is going on all our lives long, as our natures become more and more conformed to God's nature. We grow up in sanctification. Justification is God's act. Sanctification is our activity of growth and maturing in God's way of life and faith. There used to be a great debate in the Christian Church regarding whether God decided to declare us justified in spite of ourselves before the creation of the world; or whether God waited until we had figured out how to sin and then decided to save us by declaring us justified in spite of ourselves.

It makes little difference to me these days, quite frankly, what the answer to that question is. I think it completely irrelevant. However, John's gospel implies that God first decided to initiate this marvelous, free flowing experiment of creation. Then God decided to save the whole world no matter what the experiment produced. Then thirdly, God created that world that God had imagined. However, what is not irrelevant in all this is the fact that God decided to save the whole world. Our entire destiny is determined by that decision. It makes possible our growth and development into Christian people and into meaningful lives. That growth starts in this life and will continue into all eternity.

Now, our children are God's people the minute they are conceived. They do not need to be baptized in order to be God's people. However, we mark them for God so that they know they are God's people. They will continue to grow as God's people because they know they have the mark of God's commitment on them. They can become God's sanctified people by growing up as God's persons.

I have baptized lots of people in my 60 years of ministry. I have baptized three generations in the same family in some cases. I have noticed that when the children are present in the congregation at a baptism,

they always take notice. I always invite all the children of the congregation up to the baptismal font so they can witness again what this sacrament is. I tell them again that they were each marked with God's mark on their foreheads. Thus we reinforce their developing awareness that they are called to be God's people, called to be sanctified, called to grow up as God's faithful ones. They can mature while enjoying the relief of knowing that God has guaranteed to them God's justification.

When Peter says we are saved by water, he is referring to our growing up in the awareness that God has marked us with this covenant mark, and as a consequence has called us to be God's kind of people. I remember distinctly, as an eight year old, sitting in a worship service, at a baptism and suddenly becoming aware of the fact that what was going on up there had been done to me eight years before. I remember what an impression that made on me. It gripped me with a sense of vocation, the awareness that this is who I am: one marked by God. This is what I am called to be.

This, I think, is what Peter means by saying that we are saved by this water. Not in some magical way. Peter says that this water certifies the way we stand toward God. It indicates our posture toward God and God's posture toward us. We are saved by this water because it affirms our justification. It certifies that God will not let us go from God's embrace. It reminds us that we are called to grow in grace. The water buoys us up and carries us into our divine destiny as Noah's ark carried him and his family into their destiny. So today we take account again of this good counsel of Peter that this water speaks to us to say that we are saved by grace for the purpose of being the facilitators of grace in the world. May God keep us all in the path of our baptismal vocation! May the marks on our foreheads carry us into our lives of sanctification!

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWENTY FIVE

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP: PSALM 96:6

Worship the Lord in Holy Splendor

Bob Hope was travelling to Hawaii and the plane lost two engines. Everybody in it was scared. Many of them were praying, others were reading the Bible, desperately trying to keep their fear under control. The little lady sitting next to Mr. Hope was going frantically through her rosary. When she cocked open the corner of one eye she noticed that Bob was sitting there quietly sipping his martini. She said, "For goodness sakes, Mr. Hope, can't you do something religious?" He said, "Yes" and took up an offering. There are a lot of people in the world for whom the notion of religion is something about like that. I was a young First Lieutenant in the First Infantry Division, Fort Riley, Kansas. The Post Chaplain assigned me the responsibility to organize a spiritual convocation for all of the chaplains at the fort together with their congregations. There were at that time 30 chaplains, each of whom was responsible for units and congregations.

We scheduled the convocation and I delegated responsibility for various aspects of it to some Second Lieutenants, platoon leaders from the 26th Infantry Regiment. Things seemed to come together very well. The young lieutenants were industrious and they all took care of their part of the planning. One was to get the special music and another was to get the hall arranged. Another was to take care of the food and so forth. The night came. It was quite a gala affair. Thirty chaplains in dress blue uniforms marched in procession and sat in the very front rows of the assembly. At that point the quartet of black soldiers from Camp Funston who had been hired to do the special music, literally turned white.

The lieutenant who had hired them went over and ask, "What is the matter?" They said, "We didn't realize that this is supposed to be a chaplain affair. We don't have any thing in our repertoire that we could sing for an occasion like this." He said "You will have in twenty minutes." So they did. They came to him in about ten minutes and said,

"We have two things to sing that are religious. One is "Crying in the Chapel" and the other is "I want a Sunday Kind of Love". There are those in the world for whom issues of religion and worship are that trivial, superficial, and poorly understood.

What is true Christian worship? How ought one to go about that kind of thing? Is it something we ought to expect to come spontaneously out of our souls without any necessary forward planning or is it something that we should carefully structure? How should it be structured? How spontaneous and extemporaneous should worship be? What should we expect? How can we meet the challenges of the scripture which says, "They that worship God should worship God in spirit and in truth?" How shall we obey the command of 1 Chronicles and of the Psalms? "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness or in holy splendor." How can we translate those words of 3,000 years ago into meaningful behavior in the 21st century? That is an important question, indeed, a biblical-theological question.

During the last quarter century there has be some genuine enthusiasm in most churches for innovation in worship services. That is a good idea if it is an expression of vitality in the spirit of the worshipping people. When that percolates into a quest for worship as authentic spiritual expression it asks for worship as it ought to be. "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." How do we do that? How do we capture the authentic longing and spontaneous expression of each soul in such a way that we can meet this injunction of the Bible every Sunday morning?

Worship is most authentic when understood as a process that starts in each member's home on Sunday morning and proceeds through seven steps: 1) Going up to the house of God, 2) Greeting God and receiving God's greeting as we begin the liturgy, 3) Expressing our Guilt and humanness before God and others, 4) Receiving absolution by Grace from God and others, 5) Accepting the Guidance from God's Word preached and sung, 6) Expressing our Gratitude to God in our gifts of money and praise, and then 7) Going down to our homes and our work in God's world.

In our worship God greets us with the invitation, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." We respond by singing, "We Praise you O God, Our Redeemer, Creator." That is good stuff. That is meaningful response to the biblical invitation. "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." However, this is not just special liturgical form of which I speak. The form is a product of the function and the function is facilitated by the form. How does one go about creating a form of worship that answers to the requirement of scripture? One thing is clear. When Jesus was speaking to

the Samaritan woman, he said, "God is spirit and they that worship God must worship God in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4).

Jesus then went on to say that because God requires this kind of genuine worship, the location and setting make very little difference. Essence and substance is the whole thing. He clearly had in mind the passage from I Chronicles that is repeated in Psalm 96. Jesus loved scripture and quoted it regularly. It was like a stream of refreshment in his soul. I suppose that if we distilled the command, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness," into a very simple proposition it would be this. God wishes us to have the kind of spirit in our worship, the kind of form in our liturgy, and the kind of spontaneous expressiveness in our responses that our real inner spirituality comes to the surface and makes itself known to God.

Now my spirituality may take a little different form than yours does. What seems like an easy and natural conduit for the expression of your deep inner spirituality to God may be a little different than what seems like a natural conduit for mine. In communal worship we need to find the way in which a form of beauty is preserved. At the same time we need to create as many opportunities or conduits of expression as possible to give each and all of us authentic spiritual expression. God expects that our authentic spirituality evident in worship will reflect the Divine Spirit shaping and inspiring who we are and what we are doing in worship.

The entire liturgy is focused, of course, in the announcement of God's grace to us. The absolution is the center of worship. Many Protestants think that the sermon is the center. It should not be. I have a notable friend who claims that we "go to sermon" rather than "go to worship." The moment of grace when God speaks unconditional forgiveness and absolution to us is the heart of worship. This can be especially dramatic and memorable when it is expressed in the drama of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper. The sermon should explain and reinforce that, of course.

Everything before that, our greeting and confession of sin, works up to the moment when God says, "You are free. You are my people and therefore I have freed you forever. No fear, guilt, or shame may in any way hem you in, impair you, or chasten you. You are my free people so that you can be free to grow, free to live, free to be whole, free to take chances and experiment with life, and free in the work of the kingdom." That is the epitome of worship and whatever comes after that is an application of it. The sermon is an application of that event of grace and is guidance from God. Then we go down from there to our work in the world. There is a holy beauty in the symmetry of this liturgy. God likes

beauty more than anything else, indeed, with God everything else is a sub-category of aesthetics.

The important thing is that we are enjoined by the Bible to be conscious that worship is not just a program. It is not just to entertain, engage, and inspire the congregation of spectators, who are not intimately invested in the process itself. Biblical worship is not just a program. It is a liturgy. The Bible says so. Worship is for the authentic deep spiritual self-expression of the congregation engaged in an interchange with God. The choir's contribution to the liturgy is not supposed to be a performance but is for support and inspiration of the congregation's expressions of praise for God. The pastor is not there to entertain but to incarnate God's guidance to the congregation. The congregation is the operant functionary, of which the pastor and choir are a supportive and inspirational part. Worship is possible even without pastor and choir.

You have all been in church services in which you were not quite sure whether you were at a performance of the Symphony Orchestra or the university players. You hungered for something deeper and spiritually profound. Let us grow in that grace which is possible for us as we continue to worship the Lord in the splendor of God's holiness.

Amen. So let it Be!

SERMON TWENTY SIX

SAVED BY HOPE:
ROMANS 8:18-20, 24, 28-29A

"If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience ...
We know that in everything God works for good for those who love him,
For those who are called according to his purpose. For those he
foreknew he predestined to be shaped in the character of his son ...."

In the novel, *Ann of Green Gables*, the main character is an attractive young woman who endures considerable suffering in her life. The general response to her ordeal is a typical comment with which we are all too familiar. "Oh, she'll just have to trust the Lord in that," and "Oh, it can't be that bad!" Occasionally such remarks are true to reality. Often they are obscenely insensitive. Recently I saw the 1950s film, *Pollyanna*, and was surprised to find how different and gratifyingly sensitive is its response to human suffering. *Pollyanna* proved to be enormously full of grace.

Undoubtedly, you remember the story of that young lady. She set her mind and heart upon handling life with gentle grace and irrepressible kindness, and in the end sacrificed her life in an attempt at rescuing another person. Her style, demeanor, mind, and heart seemed thoroughly tuned to cherishing kindness despite the harsh unpleasantness and abuse life can inflicts upon a person. I found the film touching and true to life. I am glad I was born in the world represented in that film. It was a good and wholesome world, full of hope. Compared with the violent children's films produced by Disney these days, *Pollyanna* is a jewel of beauty and blessedness.

After her heroic death, the town which had reviled her sacrificial kindness as naive began to reflect upon its own spiritual insensitivity to her and its palpable loss at her departure. The children said, "She gave us hope and saved our town." Pollyanna always looked for the good and refused to focus upon the evil or painful. She hoped consistently for the ideal. Because her hope was so redemptive, the ideal happened. The town was saved by the heart of hope she had incarnated in her life and in the life of the town.

Paul remarks (Rom 8:24) that we are saved by hope. The context urges that our Christian hope is the experience of finding secure footing in life in the expectation of a safe eternity and the renewal of the entire created world. We are saved by hope for time and eternity because our hope for God's full revelation of divine grace and for our eternity with God is a spiritual gyroscope that keeps us correctly oriented and in balance. The certainty of God's grace provides us a trust base upon which to stand in all spiritual and psychological weather, so to speak.

Obviously Paul is certain that in life and death our confidence in the biblical assurances of the radical nature of God's unconditional and universal grace provides a sense of mundane and transcendent reality that holds up well in all the vagaries of life's odyssey. I have been irrepressibly optimistic ever since I experienced an illumining numinous event at seven years of age. My sure sense of the redemptive presence of God to me from that amazing moment forward has engendered in me an adequate view of what is real, meaningful, and healing, as I make my way before the face of God and in the Stream of the Divine Spirit. That outlook has consistently filled me with a confident hope in God's personal love and grace to me.

The scripture assures us (Heb 11:1-3) that faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen." That sounds very enigmatic, but I have found it to be a profound truth. Faith is grounded in the tangible experiences in life that God is providentially benevolent and cherishing. That experiential evidence is the substance of my sense of reality. It forms the lens through which I see everything else in life so everything gives me more and more evidence of God's cherishing benevolence. God averts all evil from my life or turns it to my profit. Thus suffering is not defeating but is the matrix in which divine grace and the presence of the Divine Spirit manifests to me.

Since I know that God will always be for me what God has always been for me, my faith based on past experience is the substance of the things I hope for. In that sense I already possess my entire future and know that it will be the matrix in which God's cherishing grace and ministering spirit will continue to become increasingly evident. My faith perspective is the substantive and tangible material, already realized in the present, of all that I hope for and will experience in the long future of time and eternity, life and death. It is my warrantee on the future.

That is why Paul can say that faith is the evidence already in hand of the unseen future. We already have the experience that makes clear what we can hope for and expect; and that means that the unseen is already evident. In every situation *Pollyanna* looked for the good and so she envisioned the good. That became a dynamic self-fulfilling prophecy. The

entire town came to share her vision and saw the hopeful future, which their hope and expectation then brought into being in terms of their behavior toward each other. Her vision became their self-fulfilling prophecy.

None of us knows anything about heaven or what the future will bring. However, we know who will bring our future to us. We know enough about God from our past experience that we can count on God being more than we can imagine in every future day. What I know about God from what I have seen makes it easy for me to trust God for what I cannot see.

Some of you may have listened to the audio version of *Whistling Down the Wind*. If you have not, do yourself the favor of finding it and spending some time with it. It is the story of a church community of rather formalistic Christians. They went through the motions of being the church but conducted themselves as though it had nothing to do with their lives. They behaved in a way that suggested that they did not really believe or live out of the meanings of the gospel. Their lives were rationalistic, racist, inflexible, and xenophobic.

One of the mothers in the community died leaving three children approaching adolescence. Their father was preoccupied with his golf club life. The community held that children should be seen and not heard. The social style intimidated the children into disciplined quiet. The three were psycho-spiritually orphaned. In their desperate grief they sought for some kind of consolation. The oldest daughter had developed a typical pubescent interest in religion and decided to read the gospels to find some help from God. She was so taken by the gospel message that she engaged her siblings in the story of Jesus. Soon a group of the neighborhood children became curious, then interested, and finally devoted to their childlike quest for understanding the gospel. They decided to gather every Sunday afternoon in the hayloft of their barn and read the Bible. This developed into a large worshipful fellowship of enthusiastically involved children.

In the process they came to two important conclusions. First, they concluded that the parents of the community did not believe in the message of the gospels and did not care about the Christian faith. Therefore, they were certain they had to keep their Sunday fellowship a secret from their parents. Second, they became deeply certain of the Second Coming of Jesus. The entire group soon became intensely focused upon the hope and expectation that Jesus would return and change their world. Longing for their dead mother, the children found peace in the gospel and held out hope of Jesus' return with the full manifestation of God's grace and love.

One Sunday as they gathered they found a man with a long beard and shaggy long hair sleeping in the barn. His clothing was unusual and hung upon his body in a disheveled manner. They did not know that he was a murder who had just escaped from the nearby prison. He had climbed over the fence in the night and with razor wire wounds in his hands and body he had come bleeding to the barn to hide from the authorities. He was very deeply asleep. They children cautiously inspected him and began to develop an explanation of who he was and how he got there. Then one of them speculated that he looked a lot like the pictures of Jesus. Soon they were all enthralled with the idea that their hopes had finally been fulfilled. Jesus had returned.

The noise of their excitement slowly awakened the man. As he turned over and opened one eye, the children asked expectantly, "Who are you?" "Jesus Christ!" he cursed in exasperation over their noisy disturbance of his sleep. The children were sure that his words confirmed their best hopes. This was Jesus Christ returned in the flesh. They began to celebrate and their worshipful adoration became more and more exciting and loud. They brought food and water for the man, and cared for him in whatever way they could.

The children continued to revere the man as Jesus Christ. He began to understand their veneration and told them was not Jesus. The children insisted that he was. They insisted that he was their only true hope and they explained their whole story to him. He insisted that he was not Jesus. Then one of the boys said to him, "We need you to be who you are, Jesus, otherwise we don't have a prayer." Then the criminal was converted by their narrative of God's grace in Christ and rose to the occasion of his role in their story. He was himself redeemed by their vision of hope.

They tried to keep this good news from their parents but the word got out about their worship meetings and about the return of Christ. In the meantime the prison authorities searched every nook and cranny of the neighborhood. The secret conflict between the children and adults increasingly took the form of the children trying to protect their savior from all the unbelieving parents, whom they knew would kill him again.

Eventually the adults discovered who the children were hiding and came to capture the criminal. They brought the police and a huge crowd gathered at the barn. The authorities ordered the children out of their loft. The children pleaded with the man regarding where he could hide. He told them that he must escape because he was not Jesus, but the one whom the authorities wanted to imprison. He told them they must leave him so they would not be destroyed with him. That sounded to the children more like Jesus than ever before.

Well the story ended quickly and apocalyptically. The children were evacuated from the barn because a fire was accidentally started by one of the crowd outside. The barn was torched. The children fled without their Jesus. The barn was totally destroyed and they were sure he was burned to death. However, the next morning when the smoldering embers were searched there was no sign of the man. The adults were sure he had escaped. The children knew that he arose and ascended into heaven. Their faith and hope was permanently confirmed.

The children in the story were saved by hope in a false myth. However, by the power of their faith and hope the myth was turned into reality. The criminal turned into a real Christ figure. He was saved by their hope and they were all redeemed by the faith that grounded that hope. Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Heb 11:1). How much more so our faith grounded in real experience with God and confidence in the life of Christ!

We are saved by hope grounded in an historical reality. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto God's self." Christian hope is faith projected through the long unknown of the future. Faith is rooted in evidence and experience. That experience is the ground of trust that God will always be for us what God has always been for us, namely, the God of radical, uncalculating, unconditional, and universal forgiveness of everyone for everything, forevermore. Now that is one really good deal!

Amen. So let it Be!

CONCLUSION

It is with a fervent prayer for the presence of God as Divine Spirit in these carefully wrought words and hard-won insights that I deliver these sermons to the publisher and to my public audience today. God has promised that God's word shall not return void of fruitful results. I take that to mean that the Divine Spirit will see to it that this "bread of life" which I am now casting upon the flowing waters of history and upon the ocean of the human community will make the rounds from ear to ear and from life to life, and will come round again as God's instrument for gathering God's weary and wounded children to God's self, until we all come safely home at last to God's embrace of love and grace. To that end I invite every saintly soul to join me in that prayer and in the publication of God's radical, unconditional, uncalculating, and universal grace, acceptance, and forgiveness for everyone forevermore.

Amen, So let it Be!

Thanksgiving Day 2012